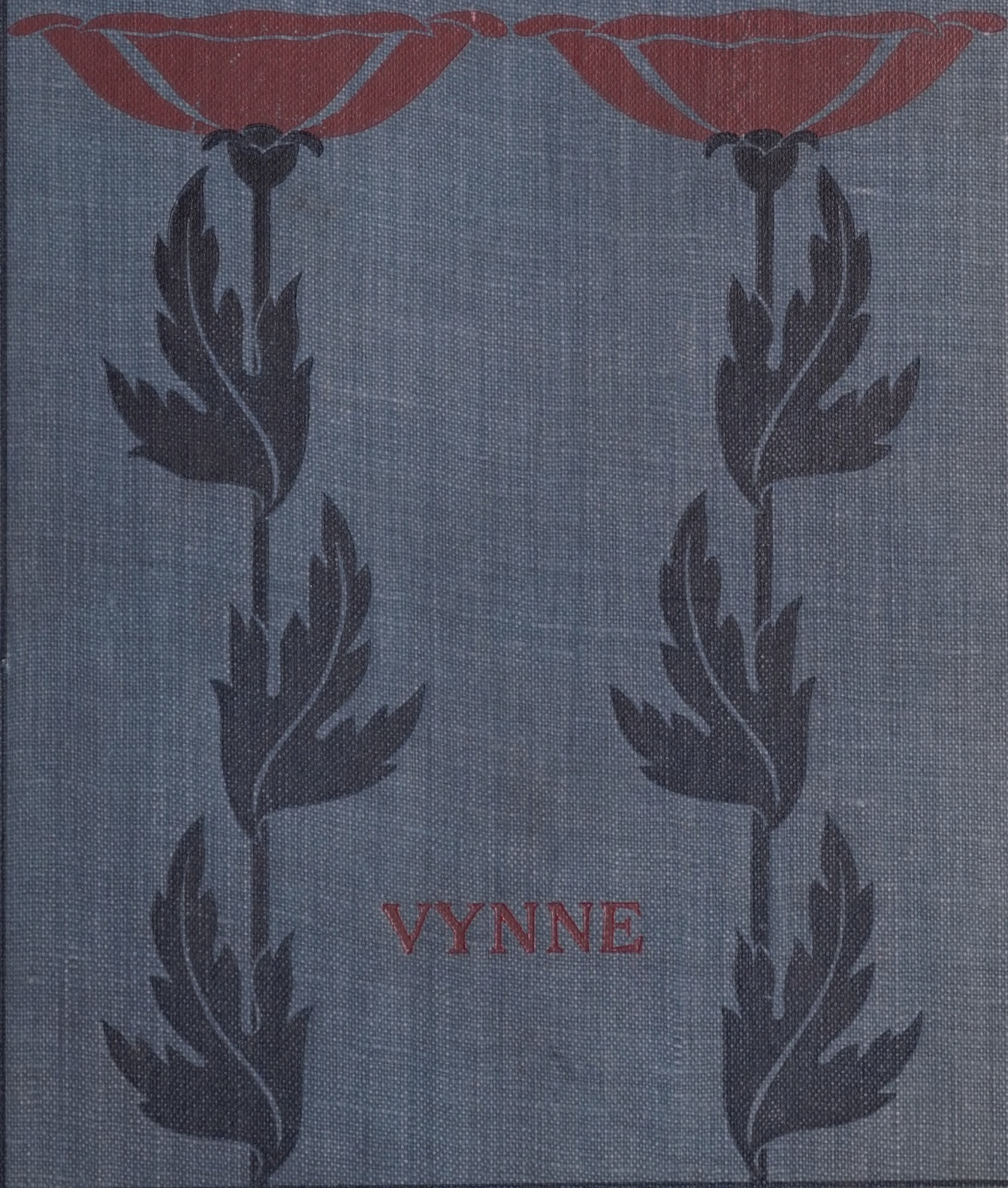


THE PRIEST'S MARRIAGE



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THE PRIEST'S MARRIAGE



THE PRIEST'S MARRIAGE

BY

NORA VYNNE

AUTHOR OF "THE BLIND ARTIST'S PICTURES," "HONEY OF ALOES"
"A COMEDY OF HONOR," "A MAN AND HIS WOMANKIND"
"THE STORY OF A FOOL AND HIS FOLLY," ETC.



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Dedicated

TO THE

BEST BROTHER AND SISTER I KNOW

JAMES M. AND ANNIE V. CHERRIE

ELFRIT

RECEIVED



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE MOTHER OF A DEBUTANTE	I
II.—THE BETROTHAL	14
III.—THE GOSSIP OF FRIENDS	26
IV.—WARNED	36
V.—JUST AS IT SHOULD BE	47
VI.—COMMUNION OF SPIRIT	58
VII.—A PARTING	68
VIII.—GOOD NEWS FOR DICK	74
IX.—AN AMATEUR GUARDIAN	82
X.—CONNUBIAL CONFIDENCES	91
XI.—EXIT A CURATE	103
XII.—A CAPITULATION	112
XIII.—EFFIE'S PHILOSOPHY	125
XIV.—COMRADES	134
XV.—A MIRACLE OF TACT	147
XVI.—A QUESTION OF A DINNER	156
XVII.—UNDERSTANDING	164

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII.—WHAT IS SIN?	173
XIX.—A NEW JOY	189
XX.—MYSTIFICATION	204
XXI.—FACING THE BLAST	215
XXII.—AN EMISSARY OF EVIL	226
XXIII.—FOR THE RIGHT	234
XXIV.—A KNIGHT'S VIGIL	242
XXV.—THE WISER WAY	249
XXVI.—RELEASED	260
XXVII.—LADY FELTRINGHAM'S CONCERN	273
XXVIII.—UNCERTAINTY	284
XXIX.—REPENTANCE	300



THE PRIEST'S MARRIAGE



THE PRIEST'S MARRIAGE

CHAPTER I

THE MOTHER OF A DEBUTANTE

DICK ARCHER found Mrs. Fulton alone in the drawing-room, when he dropped in casually on his way to Lady Feltringham's reception. Mrs. Fulton was reclining, as she generally was, on a little sofa, and gave her hand to Dick without rising. She was not ill, but, as she herself would have explained, she so often was ill that it would have been giving unnecessary trouble to her friends to force them to recognize the variations of her health.

"Nan is upstairs, dressing," she said; "this is the night of her dance; had you forgotten? The Baileys are taking her; she has to go to them. She is a little late, I fancy."

"I'll take her to Mrs. Bailey's," said Dick. "I'm going to Lady Feltringham's, and it's close by."

Mrs. Fulton placidly agreed to the suggestion. Dick must have a cab in any case, and if he took Nan in it, that would save two shillings ; and there was reason to save money just now, for she saw the woman's great occasion for spending it looming in the distance. Aloud she said :

“ You go to so many interesting houses, Dick.”

“ It 's all in the day's work,” said Dick, patiently.

“ Mrs. Bailey takes Nan about a good deal, does n't she ? ”

“ Yes—it 's so nice for the child, since I can't take her myself. Besides, they know so many more people than I do.”

She spoke slowly, looking at Dick a little doubtfully. She knew he had not a very high opinion of the Baileys, but then, everyone could not visit Cabinet Ministers' wives, as Dick did. There was a long pause in the conversation, then Dick said—for the sake of saying something—

“ Nan is a long time dressing, is n't she ? ”

“ She has a new frock,” said Mrs. Fulton ; “ are you in a hurry ? What time should you be at Lady Felttingham's ? ”

“ Oh, any time will do ; there 's no hurry.”

“ Have a cigarette while you wait,” said Mrs. Fulton ; “ it makes me restless to watch anyone waiting. We must let the child be as long as she likes. It is natural she should wish to look her best to-night.”

“ Is the dance anything special ? ”

“ Someone special is to be there, I believe.”

Dick said “ Yes,” in a tone of awakened interest. Mrs. Fulton went on doubtfully :

“ I don’t even know him ; that ’s what makes me so anxious, but the Baileys have the very highest opinion of him.”

There was a short silence, then Dick said quietly :

“ Do you mean that Annie is engaged ? ”

“ Not quite ; but I expect that she will be when she comes back to me.”

“ To a man you don’t know ? ”

“ I ’m such an invalid,” said Mrs. Fulton, apologetically. “ Of course I shall know him before the thing is finally settled. Meanwhile the Baileys have told me a great deal about him, that ’s some comfort.”

“ Who is he ? ”

“ His name is Eustace Stravil.”

“ I never heard of him.”

“ Oh, you would n’t, I dare say. He is of good family, but he does n’t go into political sets at all. He is well off, the Baileys tell me.”

“ A good sort of fellow ? ”

Mrs. Fulton’s face brightened :

“ Why, that ’s just what he is, Dick, really good—that ’s what pleases me ; of course you ’ll laugh, because you have no religion at all, but Mr. Stravil used to be a Roman Catholic—was educated for a priest, in

fact, but when he grew older and wiser, he changed. Now a man must be really in earnest about his religion before he will take the trouble to change it. That's what sets my mind at rest about Annie's engagement."

Dick did not laugh. Mrs. Fulton's comfortable Low Church idea that a man was bound to be the better for giving up what she would have termed "popery" was so thoroughly characteristic of her. Neither did he protest against being judged to be entirely without religion.

"Don't you think you ought to have known more about the man than that before things went so far?" he said, speaking a little sharply.

"My dear Dick, how could I?" she protested. "You can put a great many questions to the man who asks leave to marry your daughter, but you can't question him when you only think he is going to propose to your daughter. I might have spoiled everything."

"What do you mean by spoiled everything?"

"Why, I might have frightened the man away by making him think that I would be a disagreeable interfering mother-in-law. Besides, I did n't even know him."

"You could have let Annie invite him to call on you."

"But that would have been making the child go farther than he had gone; one would do this with an ordinary acquaintance, but in a case like this a girl is

wiser to show no preference whatever until the thing is put into plain words. 'Think how humiliated she would be afterwards if nothing came of it.'

"There seems to me to be a good deal of unnecessary fencing in the matter," Dick said, impatiently. "Surely if a man wants to marry a girl, he knows it and should n't mind owning it, and if a girl wants to marry a man, she should know it and should n't mind showing it."

"My dear Dick," said Mrs. Fulton, "do you really think that now?"

"No," said Dick, breaking into a laugh, "no, that's all nonsense. I am quite sure neither person concerned ever knows anything of the matter till the last moment; it is a spontaneous impulse proceeding entirely from the assistance of outsiders. I don't think you all need have been in quite such a hurry about Nan."

"I have n't been exactly in a hurry, my dear," said Mrs. Fulton; "I don't think you should say that. Though this is Nan's first season, she is n't a baby; it is only her first season because I was such an invalid, and did n't know enough people to give her anything worth calling a season. I think the poor child would have had a fair chance of growing into an old maid before we realized what was happening, if the Baileys had n't taken such a fancy to her. If this affair we are talking of turns out well, I shall be very glad."

"And, in the circumstances," said Dick, "I quite

understand that we must not expect Nan downstairs just yet, so I will have that cigarette you suggested, if I may ? ”

As he turned from lighting it, Mrs. Fulton was looking at him doubtfully. He waited for the question.

“ Of course I have been wondering what you would say,” she began.

“ And you find I make myself very disagreeable over a matter which does not concern me ? ”

“ I wondered a little if you would have liked things—different.”

“ No,” he said, “ that ’s just it ; I did n’t want anything to be different—I wanted everything to be just the same. That ’s what one always wants when things are pleasant, is n’t it ? I wanted our little trio to stay as it was—and I want the ministry to keep in office, but it won’t. They ought to have gone out after the fracas last week, and if they drag on for another three months, that ’s the limit. Then I shall be an expensive young man with no income and no invitations to dinner, not even to receptions after dinner.”

“ But to come back to the child,” said Mrs. Fulton.

“ That ’s the worst of it,” said Dick. “ We can’t come back to the child. We find a young lady who is ‘ out,’ who goes to dances—subscription dances—and comes home engaged to a man we don’t know ; and presently, I suppose, we shall find a smart married woman who will, I fancy, be among the few who will

continue to ask me to dinner when I have no income. Well, the world won't stand still, of course. I should n't have said that this was no concern of mine, Mrs. Fulton. I am concerned."

"Hush ! here is Nan," said Mrs. Fulton, dropping her voice ; " don't let her know I told you yet. She would never forgive me if nothing comes of it."

Annie came into the room. If her appearance had taken her some time and trouble, the result repaid it. She looked her best, and her best was very sweet and winning, and so young and pure that the little pearl heart on the slender chain round her throat seemed almost emblematical. She saw Dick at once, and gave a little exclamation of pleasure.

" I did n't know you were here, or I would have hurried," she said.

" Dick is going with you to Mrs. Bailey's," said her mother.

" Oh, Dick, are you going to the dance, too ? How nice ! "

" No, but I am going your way, and can put you into your friends' charge," said Dick.

She looked up at him quickly, a little anxiously, wondering what had brought that curious note of restraint into his voice. Dick had the sort of voice one likes to listen to even when what it says is not of much importance ; he never said much, in any case. Annie, on the contrary, talked a good deal, but, like most

girls, always stopped short just at the thing she really meant.

"Are you pleased with your frock, dear?" asked Mrs. Fulton.

"I'm not quite sure—my glass is n't big enough to see it all at once. I'm not sure if this queer tunic thing goes right behind."

"It goes quite right," said Dick, gravely; "I noticed it particularly as you crossed the room as the very latest development, and it is pretty into the bargain."

"I don't like wearing white," said Annie, doubtfully, "it's so childish; besides, one ought to be very dark or very fair to wear white. It makes middling people look insipid. But Ella Payne is wearing scarlet, and somehow, when Ella is wearing scarlet I always want to wear white as much as I can."

"I can understand that," said Dick. "I've met Miss Payne in scarlet."

"One does like to make a contrast, of course," said Mrs. Fulton, "even if it's only a contrast of color. Now what is there to laugh at in that, Dick?"

"Annie's contrast goes a little further, that's all," said Dick.

"It's always such a temptation to darken one's eyebrows when one wears white," continued Annie. "I thought about it for at least five minutes. Do you think it would be very wrong?"

“ One generally thinks it is,” said Mrs. Fulton, “ but still, if it made you look nicer——”

But Annie was looking at Dick, so he answered her :

“ Artistically I should say it would be wrong, they are very well as they are. On higher grounds I suppose I ’m not qualified to give an opinion ; your mother has just been saying that I have no religion.”

“ Oh, mother,” cried Nan, “ I wish you would n’t say such funny things.”

“ No religion, and presently no income,” said Dick. “ It is very unfortunate.”

“ No income ? Have the ministry gone out then ? ”

“ No, but they ought to have gone, and they must go soon, and then I shall have no income.”

He looked so careless and so handsome as he leaned, cigarette in hand, against the mantelpiece that it was small wonder if she did not take him seriously.

“ But then you never have very much income, have you ? You won’t trouble about it very badly ? ”

“ I sha’n’t trouble at all till the time comes—I don’t know why I mentioned the circumstance.”

“ My dear, had n’t you better start ? ” said Mrs. Fulton.

“ Let Dick finish his cigarette,” Nan said ; “ there is no hurry.”

“ It ’s finished,” said Dick ; “ or will be by the time I get a cab. Let me go—I ’m sure Hannah is busy.

I've got a beautiful new cab whistle, and it is a real pleasure to me to blow it."

Annie watched him anxiously as he left the room. She looked quite troubled. Her mother was watching her. The two seemed a little shy of each other now they were alone.

"You look very nice, my dear," said Mrs. Fulton.

"Do I? I'm glad. I'm sorry Dick is going to a horrid party; he could have stayed and talked to you."

"My dear, he is going to Lady Feltringham's."

"Of course," said Annie; "I'd forgotten; but I'm sure he would much rather have been here with you."

"What time shall you be back to-morrow, dear?" asked Mrs. Fulton.

"Oh, in the morning before lunch—that is, unless Mrs. Bailey comes back with me. Then, of course, I must wait for her; that may make me later. There are some girls staying in the house, and she will want to let them talk about the dance. Mrs. Bailey is very kind to girls, I think."

"I wish we could make some little return to her girls," said Mrs. Fulton.

"Perhaps I shall be able to some day," said Annie.

"Mother, I——" she stopped. They heard Dick whistling hard at the hall door.

"Will Dick have no money at all when he is n't Lord Feltringham's secretary," asked Annie.

"I don't know," Mrs. Fulton said placidly. "He

always has been Lord Feltringham's secretary ever since we have known him, and he always seems to have enough money for a single man."

"I hope he has. I can scarcely imagine Dick going about shabby and hard up."

"Oh, he would n't do that," said Mrs. Fulton, cheerfully; "he would get into debt. That's such an easy way of living for a young man of good family."

Annie laughed. All ways of living were somewhat easy in her easy-going mother's eyes, but before she had time to answer Dick came back to say the cab was there.

Left alone, Mrs. Fulton felt a moment's compunction over her late complaisant acquiescence in the saving of her daughter's cab fare. Of course, Dick must have paid his own in any case; but if he was going to be really poor, she was sorry she had been so pleased at her own saving of these two shillings.

She was anxious as to her daughter's future, and troubled that she had so little share in the direction of it. She even went so far as indulging in a little Low Church prayer that all might go well; and then, considering that well or ill she could know nothing till an indefinite hour to-morrow, went to bed hoping gently for the best.

It was a short drive to the Baileys. Only Mrs. Fulton's placid recklessness would have rated the fare at two shillings. Dick had no intention of giving

more than eighteenpence. Nan did not talk much. Dick felt rather than saw that she was preoccupied and nervous. He felt a curious pity for her. He did n't know why ; a girl going to receive her first offer of marriage should not need pity. But it was as if they were all letting her go unarmed and unwarned into danger. Letting her go ! Why, they had been leading her, coaxing her, pressing her forward, consciously or unconsciously—her kind, careless mother, those well-meaning, stupid Baileys, everyone—and there was no one to warn her not to go an inch farther or a moment faster than she would go of herself. Then he remembered she was not quite sure that the love would be offered—that might be the cause of the trouble in her eyes. That was why he had been asked not to let her know the matter had been mentioned to him. He could guess how the girl would fret if she learned that anyone knew she expected an offer of marriage and none were to come.

They had reached the Baileys' door and he had said nothing. There was nothing to be said, unless it were possible to lead up to some platitude about the folly of girls getting engaged through the pressure of friends when they were not quite sure of their own feelings ; and even that, unless done with more skill than the time at his disposal would allow, might let her know her mother had been speaking of her. He would probably have attempted something in the way of

warning in spite of his promise, but the hall door opened too quickly. Annie was a little late ; at sound of her cab stopping the party had come into the hall.

Dick caught a scarlet glimpse of Miss Payne, and, beyond her, of one or two girls in tamer colors. Behind them several men were standing. He turned to Annie to say good-night, still considering the possibility of that word of warning ; but he stopped short. She had seen one of the men in the background, and her face was not the face of a girl hurried into marriage against her will.

But if Dick had been a little older or a little wiser, he would have made an opportunity for his protest. Complete innocence may be an excellent, almost a perfect, safeguard for a woman so far as the bearing of others towards her is concerned ; it is no help at all in her judgment of others. He disliked her friends, the Baileys and their friends, but was in the habit of telling himself that Annie was too good to be spoilt ; it did not occur to him that the harm lay not in the vulgarity or silliness she might learn from them, but in the want of what she might have learned had her mother been less simple and her friends better bred.





CHAPTER II

THE BETROTHAL

THERE was a chorus of good-natured scolding as Annie entered the hall. Then Mrs. Bailey set about packing the girls into the carriage while the men of the party prepared to follow in hansoms. Ella Payne, calmly ignoring Mrs. Bailey's arrangements, went off in a hansom with Mark Scarsdale. Beatrice Bailey was engaged, so was allowed to go with her *fiancé*. Annie found herself next to Effie Bailey and regretted it, not that she disliked her, but she disliked what she knew she must expect of her just then.

"You clever girl," she began in what might be termed a carriage undertone, directed straight at Nan's ear. "You clever girl, you could n't have done better than to make that good-looking man bring you here ; it was just the one thing needed. You should have seen Mr. Stravil's face when he saw you both. Who was the other man ?"

Annie had seen Mr. Stravil's face, and knew that

Effie spoke the truth. The knowledge hurt, but she answered quietly :

“ Don't be silly ; I did n't make anybody come. He was calling on mother and happened to be coming this way. He is quite an old friend of mother's and mine.”

“ Is he coming to the dance ? ”

“ No ; he was on his way to Lady Feltringham's.”

“ Oh, as grand as that ! Then, of course, he would n't come to stupid subscription dances. Is that the ' friend ' they talk about, mother and Mr. Stravil, I mean ? I wish I had some young men for old friends. All our old friends are old fogies. Perhaps he dances badly. Please let me think he dances badly, or else I shall be wishing he were here all the evening and hating all the men who are here.”

“ He dances extremely well ! ” said Nan.

“ Then all I can say is, I wonder you can think of Eustace Stravil.”

“ I never told you that I did think of Mr. Stravil.”

“ Don't be cross. Of course, you never told me, and he never told me that he was in love with you ; but all the same I expect to see you dance six times and go down to supper with him, and if I did the same with Mark Scarsdale, who has n't any money, mother would scold me when we got home, and she won't scold you.”

“ She does n't scold Ella, and Ella danced all the evening with Mr. Scarsdale last Wednesday.”

"Oh, no one ever scolds Ella," Effie said with a certain respectful envy. "I expect that 's because everyone knows that however much she may flirt she would never do anything really silly."

Effie's estimate of Mr. Stravil's demands on Nan's programme proved tolerably correct, and, moreover, when he was not dancing with her, he did not dance at all—except, of course, the one dance with every lady of his hostess's party which the etiquette of subscription dances requires. Once, in the generosity of her own enjoyment, when Nan had noticed a shy, plain girl, whom she knew slightly, sitting out a great many dances, she had suggested that Stravil should invite her, and then colored uncomfortably on seeing that the Bailey girls had noticed her assumption of authority. It was tiresome of them to be so interested in her doings. Stravil had gone at once to be introduced to the girl and had asked her for a dance. It was over now; the evening was nearly at an end, and, after a long valse, Stravil and Nan had turned into a little recess where the gas was burning very faintly. Nan was tired, but pleasantly tired. So far, it had been a very happy evening.

Neither of them seemed anxious to talk. Effie's remarks came back into the young girl's mind and made her shy and constrained. It was not true that she was, or ever had been, more anxious to receive this man's love than he to give it. Why, she had rather

disliked him at first ; it was only his persistence that had overcome her dislike. She had only acquiesced at last when he and everyone else took it for granted that he was in love with her. Of course Mrs. Bailey had invited him to dinners and dances, but then he need not have come if he had not wanted to meet her.

Stupid and vulgar people always thought the girl was sure to be the more eager of the two, and Effie was certainly vulgar ; even Mrs. Bailey herself said so. It was a horrid idea ; it made one want to be engaged to a man much more than one did really just to show that one could. She did want to be engaged to Mr. Stravil. She had known that for weeks, and been very angry with herself for the knowledge ; and yet, to-night, she had a curious feeling that she would be glad if he went away and she never saw him again as long as she lived, and so ended all her own doubts and other people's discussions.

"How white you look in the shadow," he said. "You seem almost transparent. With a little imagination one could believe that you gave out light. Might one touch you, I wonder, just to see if you are real?"

She laughed a little nervously. "Oh, I am quite real, I think ; you've been dancing with me—that was touching me, was n't it?"

"What, with a roomful of people looking on? That did n't count. If that were all, we might as well be back in the ballroom."

" I thought we came here because I was tired."

" Did we? I did n't think we came for that. Are you tired? "

" No—at least I am enjoying myself so much that if I don't rest I shall be tired presently. You said, ' Come and rest a little,' so I came."

" I wonder," he said, " if you are one half as tired as I am? "

" What are you tired of? "

" A great many things; chiefly, the one thing I once thought worth caring about."

" Did you only care about one thing? I care about so many. What was your one thing? "

" One might call it liberty."

" Oh, I can't understand anyone tiring of that. I love it."

" I wonder now," he said with a laugh, " what a little white thing like you means by liberty."

" Why, not being ordered about, or worried, and——"

" Well? "

" Well, not being married, and not wanting to be."

" You are not tired of that, then? "

" No, of course not; I 've only just begun. No; not tired at all—but,——"

" But what? "

" Tell me about your liberty, that you are tired of."

He looked in her face and laughed softly.

“ I think I won't do that; you tell me what you were going to say when you stopped.”

“ I was n't going to say it, that was why I stopped.”

“ You had said that you liked liberty and were not tired of it, and that for you liberty meant not being married and not wanting to be but—now without what might be expected to follow that ‘ but,’ I should have to get up and go, you know.”

“ It's not fair to talk to me in questions; one always gives quite a wrong impression answering questions, and I don't want you to get up and go ; you know I don't. But that is n't because I am tired of anything, and if you are tired I am sorry ; things you say often make me sorry.”

“ What things, for instance ? ”

“ I can't remember any of them now.”

“ Don't remember any of them again. I won't say them any more.”

“ Why not ? I 'd rather know just exactly what you thought even if it did make me sorry.”

“ Because you are very beautiful and very good—and if there is anything ugly in me it shall be kept out of your sight.”

“ Then I shall be no help to you.”

“ The greatest help a woman can give a man is not to know his faults.”

“ Do you know,” she said doubtfully, “ that you have a great many theories about women ? ”

"You shall revise them," he said, "and I'll give up those you don't approve of."

At that moment, another couple, looking for a quiet corner for themselves, drew aside the curtain, flooding the little recess with light; they stood a moment looking embarrassed and then fled, forgetting to replace the curtain. Annie felt the color rise in her face, and glanced quickly at Stravil. He seemed about ten times as embarrassed as she, so she looked away again.

"There was plenty of room for them, too," she said, carelessly.

Stravil laughed.

"Suppose we go back now," she said. "I think I'm engaged for this dance or the next."

"Stay where you are," he said under his breath, but imperatively. She began to feel a little afraid of him.

"I must n't cut dances," she said; "it's rude," and she half arose.

"What matter? No one but I must see you looking as beautiful as you look now. I have n't finished what I brought you here to say. Before you go back you will have promised to be my wife, and then I shall have you safe, however beautiful you look."

"Oh," she said, under her breath, dropping back into her seat; "you have rather a funny way of asking, have n't you?"

"I don't believe I could have asked you at all," he

said, "if those two had n't come. I could n't talk of love to you, you looked so white—so mystical, and cold, and good. It's easier to speak now you are flushed, and troubled, and human. I dare take your hand now. My dear, my dear, do you know you're the loveliest little girl in the whole world—and I would have shot myself if you had n't said yes. You have n't, by the way. Have I been too sudden? Have I frightened you? Do you want time to think—to ask your mother—Mrs. Bailey? Should I have spoken to them first? I meant to do that, to get them to persuade you, but when I saw that man come to the door with you to-night, I made up my mind I'd have your promise before we parted this evening, and I have it, have n't I? Don't tell me I'm too late."

"No, of course not; how can you think so? If you were too late, I should n't be here."

"You will promise me?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was coming here to-night with the rest of us. I was as jealous as a boy; and I was as glad as a boy would have been when I found he was n't."

"But it would n't have made any difference if he had."

"I'm a little sorry for him," Stravil said.

"Oh, but you must n't be," Nan said, laughing.

"That was Mr. Archer. There is nothing for anyone

to be sorry for about him. He will be quite pleased that I am so happy. He is my friend, you know."

"Yes, I knew all about that, on Mrs. Bailey's authority; 'known you from a child'—unique specimen of the non-existent monster called platonic friend—but, you see, I don't believe in platonic friendships, more particularly when a girl is as young and as pretty as you. I won't be jealous of him now you have given me your word, but you must let me be sorry for him."

"Indeed, you must n't be," said Nan, indignantly; "that 's worse than being jealous. It 's such a dreadful liberty to be sorry for a man who has n't anything the matter with him; besides, it will make things so uncomfortable when we ask him to dinner."

"When we ask him to dinner? Are we going to ask him to dinner? Have you thought it all out and arranged the *menage*, and decided how many dinners we are to give in the course of the season?"

"Of course I have thought about it," said Nan, surprised. "How could I have known whether I would say yes or not if I had n't thought about it?"

"And all the while I should n't have had the courage to speak if the light had n't suddenly shown me that my angel was a woman."

"Why should it want so much courage?" asked Annie, a little troubled. "Of course, I understood; you don't want me to pretend I did n't, do you? Why, I should n't have danced so many times with you or

come here unless I had understood. You would n't like to think I would do as much with anyone, would you?"

"I never thought of that; of course you would not. Well, I suppose one could n't take a girl by surprise unless one proposed to her half an hour after the introduction."

"I'm glad you did n't do that," said Annie; "for I would have said no, then."

"Did you dislike me?"

"Well, yes, I thought I did; but not only because of that, because of what I said just now. I did n't want to be married. I wanted to go to parties, and have fun with the others, and care for little foolish things, as girls do, but—well, this is what I would n't go on saying a little while ago, you know—but presently I found that the parties were n't any fun unless you were there, and I did n't care about the foolish things a bit, because I was so anxious about you; and then I knew I should have to say yes, if you asked me. But if it had n't been for that I should n't have wanted to be engaged for years and years."

"How foolish women are!" he said. "Don't you know you can only have your first year of youth once. Don't you know you can never again be to any man what you are to me to-night—a young girl listening to her first lover; a shut bud can only open once, and then the perfume goes. It's a marvel to me how these

girls who have gone from ball to ball, and heard man after man talk of love to them, ever find anyone to marry them at the last. Why, you sweet, shy little thing, don't you know that every year, every ball, every single dance with another man would have taken something from you? Something that could never have been brought back as long as you lived; something indefinable—I can't put it into words—but I know that it is what I love you for."

"Oh, but don't," she cried. "Don't love me like that."

"Like what?"

"I don't know—like a Mahometan."

He laughed a little.

"Do I love you like a Mahometan? Well, I won't; modern life won't allow it. But that is just what I would like. I believe every man would rather think his wife not only never would be loved, but never had been loved, never even seen by another man. I would like to shut you up in a harem, with no one but women to talk to, and not too many of them. But don't be afraid. We shall have to live like our neighbors, go about with each other, and give dinners and invite the platonic friend to them."

"Sha'n't you like doing that?" asked Annie, anxiously.

Stravil laughed.

"I'm afraid he's in love with you."

“ But he is not.”

She looked at Stravil with quiet certainty; he looked down at her, amused but tender.

“ I wonder,” he said, “ what makes you so sure of that,” and he laughed a little.

“ You have no idea,” she said, “ how utterly different he is from you.”





CHAPTER III

THE GOSSIP OF FRIENDS

BEATRICE and Effie Bailey, with two other girls, who were pretty, but dull and shy, were all brushing their hair in Beatrice's room. Nan, who shared it with her, had been kept downstairs by Mrs. Bailey. All the girls knew why perfectly well, and they found the incident a very much more interesting topic of discussion than their own little experiences of the evening.

"It 's been very quick," said Beatrice, seriously; "very quick indeed. I hope she really likes him."

"Everyone can't be as slow as you and George Sutton," said Effie, cheerfully. "He took a year to ask you, and you a month to answer him, and goodness knows when you mean to be married. After all, Mr. Stravil has known Nannie three months, and I don't suppose she 'll be married in a fortnight. She could n't get her clothes in the time."

"I wonder what he said?" murmured one of the shy girls.

“ Oh, they all say pretty much the same thing,” cried Effie. “ ‘ You ’re so good—you ’re so good—you ’re so good.’ You are so good and beautiful that it ’s a wonder you don’t fluff right up into heaven and leave them staring after you with their mouths open. Of course, if you ’ve got any sense, you don’t believe a word of it, but you know it ’s the right thing for men in their condition to say, so you try to look as if you were, and take it quietly.’ ”

“ Do people say that to you ? ” asked the less shy of the two shy girls, who was the more dull, and, like many dull people, was very often rude in the hope of being witty.

“ They have n’t yet, because I ’m only just out ; but they will, you ’ll see. I ’ll tell you all about it when they do.”

“ What nonsense she talks—what nonsense everyone talks,” said Ella, who had come from the adjoining room in time to hear the last sentences, and seemed a little cross and tired. “ What a mistake it is to bring girls up in the belief that they will be loved in proportion as they deserve it. I never met a woman yet who was loved because she was good, though here and there one hears of one who is loved in spite of it.”

Ella had seated herself on the edge of the bed, with the flounce of her scarlet skirt flying out on each side of her like a fan, and her scarlet shoes straight out in front of her. Certainly she justified Nan’s instinct to

wear white in her company. When Ella wore scarlet, she talked scarlet, and smiled scarlet, and gave the impression that her whole nature was scarlet. A man might have been a little startled. The girls were not ; they knew that next day she would probably wear dove color, and talk and act up to it consistently.

The shy girl blushed and spoke :

“ I was watching to-night, and I am sure he loves Annie because she is good.”

“ Oh, no,” cried Effie ; “ Ella is right. Nan is good, of course, dreadfully good ; but Mr. Stravil does n't love her for that. He loves her because he thinks she 's good ; but he only thinks she 's good because she 's so pretty ; and, after all, there 's reason in it. Goodness is such a heavy thing to manage ; not one woman in fifty can make it really interesting. Wickedness, of course, is interesting in itself.”

“ If you talk like that, you and Ella,” said the dull girl, “ you will frighten away all your lovers, and then you 'll never be married.”

“ But we don't talk like that,” said Effie ; “ at least not in public. If I have any ideas—and one can't help having them sometimes—I save them till I 'm going to bed, and there 's nobody to be shocked but Bee.”

“ I don't have to do that. I 'm too stupid naturally,” said the shy girl, “ so I suppose I ought to marry very well.”

“ That 's quite a different thing,” said Ella, who

was screwing her hair into pins. "Natural stupidity is like naturally curly hair, it never twists in quite the right way. You 'll have to learn to be clever, Dollie, and then learn how to hide it."

"Yes," said Effie ; "because the husband who married you for not being clever would be sure to neglect you for not being clever afterwards. The really clever thing is to make him love you because he thinks you a silly, ignorant little thing, and then make him go on loving you because he finds you a clever woman."

"I never saw the attraction of wickedness," said Beatrice, who was generally a sentence or two behind a conversation, and was thinking of George Sutton.

"Oh, I did n't mean in a man," said Ella, in prompt apology. "Good men are extremely interesting. When a woman is good, it is merely because she is the average woman ; when a man is good, that 's originality and character. Besides, one never quite knows what a good man won't do next. If George Sutton came to you to-morrow and told you that he was tired of theoretical socialism, and meant to be practical and give all he had to the poor, and go round with a coal cart, you would n't be surprised ; what is worse, I don't believe you would give him up."

"No," said Beatrice, "I would n't."

"George's socialism won't ever go much further than wearing jæger shirts," said Effie, consolingly, "and there 's not much harm in that. But there 's a

great deal of aggravation if he 's going to be related to you."

" I suppose," said the shyest girl, " that Mr. Stravil is very wicked ? "

" Mr. Stravil ! "

Ella suddenly sat up straight on the bed, and drew in her shoes.

" Are you talking about Annie and Mr. Stravil ? " she said.

" Why, yes, of course," said Beatrice ; " did n't you know—we 've been expecting it for weeks, and we are sure that he proposed to her to-night. That is why mother is keeping her downstairs—to hear all about it."

Ella was standing now, looking very white and very much shocked.

" But Mr. Stravil can't marry ; he 's a priest."

There was a moment's silence ; for Ella's tone took them by surprise. Then Beatrice spoke :

" He was a priest at one time, I believe, but he changed his religion when he was old enough to choose for himself ; he told mother so. That was a long time ago. He is just like any other man now."

" Very much like any other man, only more so," said Effie. " Why, he has been quite wild ; I heard mother talking about it to Mrs. Fuller. And of course they both thought he was all the more likely to settle down and be a good husband. Mothers always think that when the man has plenty of money."

“ He can never be a husband,” said Ella ; “ he will always be a priest.”

“ Surely,” said the less shy girl, “ people have the right to change their opinions. Why look at Luther.”

Mentally the rest of the party looked at Luther, and were satisfied. Ella repeated the name, letting it drop off her lips like a term of opprobrium.

“ It ’s shocking,” she said ; “ I can’t believe Annie will do such a thing.”

“ Why whom did you think we were talking about ? ” asked Effie.

“ Mr. Archer, of course.”

“ Oh, she could n’t marry him ; why, she ’s known him years and years. Besides, he has n’t any money.”

“ He always looks as if he had a great deal,” said Ella, thoughtfully ; “ but, to be sure, that ’s the special privilege of people who have n’t any ; perhaps he expects to have some some day.”

Ella seemed to have dropped Eustace Stravil on considering Mr. Archer’s circumstances. At that moment Annie came into the room. She looked a little startled and distressed to see the girls still there. She had lingered downstairs longer than was necessary to satisfy Mrs. Bailey on purpose to give them time to disperse.

“ Here you are at last,” cried Effie. “ Of course we ’re all talking about you. Do tell us, like a dear girl, are you engaged ? But of course you are.”

"Yes," said Nan, shyly, too happy to feel offended at the question ; "it 's not a secret, and I 'm very happy, and it 's nice of you to care, but I wish—I mean I 'm very sleepy, so please let me go to bed quietly, like dear girls."

"Oh, but we must talk a little. We want to congratulate you."

"Ella does n't want to congratulate you," said the dull girl.

"No," said the shyer one, who, like most shy people, could nearly always summon courage enough to say the thing best left unsaid. "No, she 's been saying you ought n't to do it."

"Ella?"

Annie turned to her friend. Ella's face was quite grave and stern. She did not speak. The shy girl, warned by a glance from Effie, guessed she had made a mistake, and, thinking an explanation better than the truth, went on fluently :

"She thinks you have behaved badly to Mr. Archer."

"No one must say anything so silly about me and Dick," said Nan, indignantly. "I have n't behaved badly ; I 've behaved exactly as he 'd want me to behave. Dick is my friend."

"I don't believe in friends," said the dull girl, giggling.

"You would if you had a friend like Dick. If you believed in them perhaps you might have one."

Annie spoke a little sharply, unfairly treating the dull girl's mistake as a second offence, because another person had made it previously.

Ella stood looking at her doubtfully. The two girls were fond of each other, despite the contrast of their characters, and some difference in their ages; not a very great difference, but Ella had the experience of five seasons, while Nan, except for her friendship with Dick, had lived almost the life of a nun until this year. Ella had always considered her as a child as far as character went. She stood looking at her. Annie looked very happy, and sweet, and good, but tired, as she had said. Ella's courage failed her. She kissed her friend good-night, and, taking her candle, retired to the inner room, which was her's exclusively. There was an impression among the other girls that the manipulation of her complexion must be left private.

"That 's right," said Effie, "let her go and say her prayers. She always says her prayers for half an hour out of a book. I never knew anyone say so many prayers and wear such low frocks in my life."

Nan was still looking in the direction Ella had gone. Beatrice came up and put an arm round her waist.

"Was it really about Mr. Archer?" said Nan.

"No; it is some nonsense about Mr. Stravil's old religion," said Bee. "Ella 's so very High Church, you know. Don't mind her."

"I don't," said Nan; "but it 's silly of her."

“ Run away to bed, all of you ; Nan is tired, and if she was n't, she does n't want to sit up all night and chatter nonsense about serious things,” said Beatrice, a little vexed at Ella's view, and troubled that Nan should seem to take it so to heart.

“ If Nan's engagement is going to be as serious as yours, I 'm sure I don't want to talk about it,” said Effie, gathering up her properties.

“ Don't be cross, Effie,” said Nan, kissing her ; “ you will know some day that when you 're very happy you can't talk about it.”

“ Oh, that 's all right, if you own that you 're happy,” said Effie, mollified ; “ but it 's rather hard to be turned out without a word when I 've been just as anxious as mother or anybody for it to turn out all right.”

Left alone, Beatrice and Nan looked at each other and laughed a little.

“ I 've been through all that,” said Beatrice. “ Before I 'd had time to know whether I even wanted George to like me or not, all my aunts and uncles had told mother it was time the affair was either off or on. But I 'm very pleased, dear. You won't mind my saying as much as that ? ”

“ No, I 'm very pleased myself ; it 's lovely to be loved.”

“ It 's lovely to love,” said Beatrice ; “ but one finds that out later. It 's lovely to find the man not quite

perfect, and not care ; and to be irritated a little with him now and then, and not mind that either, because his faults belong to you more than anything else about him.”

“ I suppose Eustace has faults,” said Nan, in a large-minded, tolerant tone, “ just the same as George Sutton.”

“ Not the same kind,” said Beatrice. “ I suppose Mr. Stravil’s faults are the sort a man gives up when he is married ; so perhaps you ’ll never see them at all. George’s are the little aggravating faults a man need n’t give up. Jæger shirts, and keeping me waiting, and arguing about socialism with people there ’s no chance of convincing. But, at any rate, you won’t have anyone to din Mr. Stravil’s faults into your ears as mother and Effie do George’s into mine. They would n’t irritate me half so much if I had n’t always to be denying them. If I had it all over again, I should n’t do that. When they said he was this, or that, or the other, I should just say, ‘ Yes, I know, that ’s why I like him.’ ”

“ I hope mother will like Eustace and be pleased,” said Nan. “ Oh, I do hope mother and Dick will like him ! ”





CHAPTER IV

WARNED

MRS. FULTON did like her daughter's lover, and the preliminaries of the marriage went very smoothly indeed. Dick, too, had nothing to say of Stravil that was not pleasant. He was a little startled on hearing that he had been a fully ordained priest, instead of having merely intended to become one ; but quite understood that Mrs. Fulton would deal very lightly with the one point where her *protégé's* eligibility might have been held to fail by a more exacting mother. At any rate, the circumstances accounted for a certain *gaucherie* that was apt to show itself at moments when the man was evidently anxious to be at his best. He was never quite at his best except at times when Annie was not present, and he was talking of ordinary matters. Dick liked him, on the whole ; and at moments when he did not was still able to admit that he was a man a woman might well be fond of. He did not see very much of the lovers—on the contrary, he showed a most comfortable and brotherly desire to efface himself.

Moreover a sudden rush of work in Lord Feltringham's department kept him much occupied, and Eustace was so devoted a *fiancé* that Nan had very little time to spare for anyone else.

One day Dick came on her in a quiet corner of Kensington Gardens, and was a little surprised.

"Why are you wandering about alone?" he said; "you 'll get lost."

"That's why I came," said Nan. "It's so nice to get lost in Kensington Gardens; you find such wonderful things. This morning I found these two delightful trees with shining leaves, and I was so pleased I nearly went up and kissed them, only one of the park-keepers might have seen me. Are n't they just like woolwork trees cut out of a sampler? I'm quite sure they are n't real. At least, I never saw them before, and I'm quite sure I shall never find them again."

"Let's sit down under them, now we've the opportunity," said Dick; "unless you want to be left alone and go on being lost."

"No," said Nan; "but I did want to be alone when I came out. It's such a change, you know, to have someone wanting you all the time—and to want him, too, of course. It's lovely to be in love, but it would be lovelier, would n't it, if one could have a 'day off' now and then. If one could quite stop being in love every Wednesday, for instance, and not care a bit for anyone, but be just as one was before. Of

course, I know that now I love Eustace if I were to lose him I should want to die ; but I should like every now and then *not* to know that. It 's rather terrible to love as much as that, is n't it ? ”

“ You 'll get used to it,” said Dick ; “ that 's what engagements are for, you know.”

“ I wish ours were going to be longer.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Well, there would be more time to get used to being so dreadfully fond of any one ; besides it 's very nice to be engaged.”

“ If you find it so, I dare say you 'll find it ever so much nicer to be married.”

“ All married people seem a little dull and prosy, don't you think ? ” said Nan.

“ Not all,” said Dick. “ Is that what 's making you afraid ? ”

“ Am I afraid ? ” asked Nan. “ Is that why I want a holiday ? I don't think it 's that. If one had a lovely diamond necklace, one would n't give it up for anything, but one would n't want to wear it every day. One would want a holiday from that.”

“ And to take to the little pearl heart on the chain again,” said Dick, looking to see if it was there.

“ Nothing round one's neck at all ! ” cried Annie, springing to her feet. “ To be quite free ! Dick, shall we run a race ? ”

“ I think not,” said Dick.

“ Why not ? We ’ve often run before. I remember once we ran all down this slope to the pathway hand-in-hand, as hard as we could go.”

“ We were late for something, were n’t we ? ”

“ I dare say. We can pretend we ’re late for something now.”

“ No, we can’t,” said Dick gravely ; “ no one can. If one ’s conscious of running with a reason, it ’s easy enough to run, but it ’s impossible to get up and run in cold blood. One is so self-conscious that there ’s no pleasure in it. Besides, there is a park-keeper ; he would think we were running to avoid paying for the chairs.”

Annie dropped back into her chair again.

“ Is n’t it wonderful ? ” she said ; “ they always find you, however many trees there are between. I believe they have wings under their coats and hang in the air like hawks, so that they can see all over the park and then swoop down just far enough off to pretend they have been walking. Why are you so grave ? Are you thinking about what I said just now ? Is it wrong ? ”

“ I was thinking about it ; of course it is not wrong. Every girl—at least every girl like you—would feel just the same. The instinct of girlhood must make some fight before it goes under. I dare say it will remind you often how good it was, but if you like marriage better, it must go, of course ; and you do like marriage better ? ”

"I do, Dick." She looked at him, laughing and coloring. "That's just it. I like it *dreadfully* better."

"Well, you can't keep both, you know."

"I wish one could. It's horrid to give up anything; but I suppose it ought n't to be if one gets something better. How did you know that about girls?"

"I did n't; you told me just now. At least, that's the way I understood what you said."

The park-keeper came up then and received his pennies, calm and smiling, with the unaggressive air that only an English official can maintain inside a uniform.

"Let's walk a little way," said Annie, restlessly. "You were going across the park to have tea with mother and me, were you not? But there's plenty of time."

They walked on as far as the bridge over the Serpentine, and leaned against the parapet talking carelessly.

Presently Annie saw Ella Payne coming round the corner of the road from Paddington with Mark Scarsdale. She felt herself coloring, for the two had not met since that night at the Baileys', when Ella had said tiresome things.

She was just beginning to feel relieved that Mark Scarsdale was with Ella, so that she could not stop, when she did stop. There was rather an effective parting between the two, and then Mark Scarsdale took the path homewards along the north side of the

Serpentine, and Ella prepared to go back the way she had come.

“ Dick,” said Annie, “ you were going to our house, were n’t you ? Will you go on now, and I ’ll come home by the time tea is ready. Ella ’s there, and I want to speak to her.”

“ Shall I wait for you ? ” said Dick. “ You will probably ask her to come too, won’t you ? ”

“ No ; it ’s something a little disagreeable. I ’ve been trying to shirk saying it for days and days, but I must say it some time, so I want to get it over. Do go ; mother will be so pleased to see you, and I sha’n’t be ten minutes after you. Tell mother it will be quite safe to order tea—I shall be as quick as that.”

“ Shall I say you will be just long enough to say something disagreeable to Miss Payne ? ”

“ Oh, no. Ella said it ; and I should n’t like mother to know. I want to tell her it ’s nonsense ; that ’s all.”

Annie had her reason for running now, so ran with a good grace and soon overtook Ella, who was walking slowly.

“ Please stop, Ella. You know I ’m here, and I want to speak to you,” she cried.

“ It ’s a lovely day for walking,” said Ella.

“ It ’s a great deal too hot for running,” said Annie.

“ You might have waited.”

“ You were not alone,” said Ella. “ I never interrupt people.”

"You could n't very well ; you were n't alone yourself," said Nan.

"No, not at first." Ella gave a little impatient sigh. "I wanted to speak to you, too," she said. "Were you quite in earnest in what you said about there being nothing between you and Mr. Archer?"

"Of course I was. It would have been horribly mean of me to have treated Dick as you thought ; but it would be meaner to let you think I could have done that, when I could n't. There 's nothing of that sort between me and Dick."

"But people hate their friends to desert them," said Ella.

"Not if they 're going to be married themselves ; if one was n't, it would be different. It would be horrid to have another girl everything and oneself the second best, but still one would n't have the right to grumble. Friends are quite free."

"How about your making Mr. Archer second best by marrying Mr. Stravil, then?"

"It 's quite different for a man ; you know it is. A married woman can have men friends, but a married man can't have women friends. I don't know why, but it does n't matter. That 's not what you are shocked at me about ; it 's not important enough to make you avoid me as you have done, and never come to congratulate me on my engagement."

"No," said Ella ; "it was n't. Nan"—she stopped

short in the road, and spoke quite impulsively—"Why, Nan, dear, as if it mattered how you treated other men when you find the man you want. It was n't the man you are not marrying, but the man you are marrying—if it can be called a marriage—that troubled me. Has n't your mother said anything—your clergyman—or even Mr. Archer?"

"What about?"

"This thing that you are doing. Has no one warned you? It is a sin—the sin of sacrilege."

Nan looked amazed for a moment. Then Ella's meaning broke on her, and contrasted with Ella's frocks, Ella's ways, her worldly wit, that effective parting with the poor boy who did not even pretend to friendship, it was so extremely amusing that she broke into a laugh, but stopped short in a moment.

"I beg your pardon, dear, but I could n't help it. It's such a queer view for you to take. Of course you mean because Eustace was once a priest. Well, I could understand a Roman Catholic thinking it wrong of me to marry him, but you are not a Roman Catholic, and he's not, and I'm not, so I can't see where the sin can possibly be."

"A man should be true to the religion of his forefathers."

"If so, you and I ought to be worshipping oak trees, and wearing blue paint, and going to human sacrifices instead of to church."

This rather staggered Ella for a moment. She went back to her first argument.

“ He is a priest.”

“ No,” said Nan ; “ but if he were, there ’s not a word in the Bible from beginning to end forbidding priests to marry. Of course, if people don’t believe in the Bible, that would be no argument ; but if anyone objects to anything on religious grounds, they are bound to go by the Bible, or else be very illogical.”

“ The laws of his Church forbid it.”

“ Eustace has left that Church for one he believes to be better. You believe it better too, or you would n’t stay in it.”

“ Do you like to be the cause of a man breaking a solemn vow ? ”

“ I was n’t ; he had changed his opinions long before he met me.”

“ You are sanctioning the taking back of a gift given to God.”

“ If anyone gave me a gift I did n’t want and had n’t asked for, I ’d let them take it back without making any fuss,” said Nan.

“ I see it ’s no use arguing,” said Ella ; “ but at least I have warned you.”

“ Well, if you thought it right, it was right for you to do it,” said Nan. “ And now you ’ve done your duty—it can’t help seeming a little funny, Ella, for

you to do a duty—you 'll be friends again, won't you ?
I want you to be one of the bridesmaids."

" I can't possibly be a bridesmaid."

" Why not ? "

" I shall be staying with the Hoxtons."

" Oh, is the time fixed so far ahead ? "

" I am to choose my own time."

" Oh ! " At the moment Nan had nothing to say beyond the exclamation.

The Hoxtons were rich, vulgar people, very anxious for their sons to marry into " society " ; and it was an open secret that the mother, who was the ruling spirit of the family, had long set her heart on Ella as a wife for her eldest, and richest, and most vulgar son.

" We don't want no more money," she said. " We wants a smart girl, as will set off 'andsome dresses and joolry, and 'old up 'er 'ead against a duchess even, and Ella Payne 's the girl for that."

All this had long been a source of amusement among the little set. It had amused Ella, too. If she were going to stay with the Hoxtons at her own time the idea must be taken seriously.

In the glory and sacredness of her new love such a thing seemed to Nan so great a sacrilege that she quite forgot her own conduct had been called in question.

" Then good-bye," she said ; " I am sorry."

“ I ’ll not say to anyone else what I ’ve said to you,” said Ella.

“ It does not matter at all,” said Nan.

And really, after the news Ella had told her, it did not.





CHAPTER V

JUST AS IT SHOULD BE

THE time between Nan's engagement and her wedding was very short, and seemed even shorter by reason of its being early in the season, when, as Mrs. Bailey said, everyone was beginning to be busy and felt more in the spirit of forming plans than carrying out engagements.

The marriage had first been proposed for an even earlier date, but that had been changed because, at the fashionable church which Mrs. Bailey attended, the vicar objected to marriages in Lent. This had disturbed Mrs. Fulton a little. "I can't understand these High Church clergymen," she said; "they call marriage a sacrament, and then put a slur on it." And she was quite anxious that Annie should not be told why the first date was changed. "You see, the child's so good and innocent," she said, "and we might make her think there's something a little wrong in marriage, and it would be a pity if a religious ceremony was the first thing to put evil into her

head. Let us say her frocks could not be got ready in time."

Good-natured Mrs. Bailey, who loved marriages, and loved even better the reputation of being the maker of marriages, had begged that the wedding might take place from her house, and Mrs. Fulton's ill-health had made her ready enough to consent. The bride and bridegroom were to take a short honeymoon, return to town for the rest of the season, and then travel again in the autumn. This was Mrs. Fulton's idea ; the one point on which she had an opinion. " She wanted," she said, " to learn to be parted from her daughter by degrees." Eustace protested against the delay at first, and then seemed suddenly to realize that this mother whom he had scarcely seen, and who had seemed of so little account, was really very dear to her daughter, and therefore must not be contradicted ; but he spoke to Nan a little impatiently about it.

" How many more people do you love ? " he asked. " I thought when I always saw you under Mrs. Bailey's wing that you were a lonely and desolate young person with no one to love you but me. Shall I find a dozen others to be considered presently ? "

" I only really care for three people in the world," said Nan. " At least, I care for a girl or two, but not in the same way. They don't count. Three's not many."

" So long as you are quite sure I come first it's not many."

“ Well, you do, you know.”

“ Then I won't even be jealous of your mother.”

“ You have made me feel a little as if I had n't treated you fairly,” said Nan. “ But what could I do? Mother was ill, and Mrs. Bailey was kind enough to take me out to parties and things ; it would have been rather ungrateful for me to say to everyone I met, ‘ My mother 's ever so much nicer than Mrs. Bailey, and if she could chaperon me I would n't have anyone else.’ ”

Eustace laughed.

“ I 've said that I won't be jealous of her,” he said ; but he still looked a little impatient, and she came a little nearer and laid a hand on his sleeve.

“ If you knew how it made me feel to see you give in to mother, you 'd be glad you gave in,” she said.

“ Then I am glad,” he answered, and so the matter was settled.

Ella kept to her resolve not to be a bridesmaid, but she also kept her promise of giving no other reason for her absence from the wedding than a visit to the Hoxtons.

“ We all know what that means,” Mrs. Bailey said to her daughters, not quite certain whether she approved or disapproved.

Beatrice was contemptuous. She thought Ella was acting disgracefully in purposing to marry openly for money. Effie was equally contemptuous. She thought Ella was acting weakly. It was silly to give in so soon.

“ I don't know how old she is, but she does n't look more than twenty-five. She might have done much better if she had had the courage to wait.”

Mrs. Bailey sighed.

Marriages, though she loved them, always made her sigh. Her own daughters were not doing well. The eldest had married a banker ; that was respectable but not brilliant ; and she had lately had reason to suspect the youngest of a clandestine flirtation with an especially ineligible curate. Beatrice's engagement was only fairly satisfactory. George Sutton had two thousand a year, but then he had “ views.”

“ Ella will be ashamed of Herbert Hoxton every time he speaks,” said Beatrice.

“ But he speaks so seldom,” said Mrs. Bailey ; “ and he can give her a thousand pounds for every ‘ h ’ he drops. After all, people who speak quite correctly are very rare.”

She sighed again. George Sutton was a University man, and a purist in matters of diction ; but what are these things worth in a man who wears a cashmere collar ?

Of course, Nan's wedding was exactly like all other weddings ; the ceremony was as late in the day as the law allows, Annie looked very pretty and quite calm, and Eustace showed no more than does the average man how much he disliked the fuss and discomfort.

After the ceremony and the reception, and the going

away of the bride, a few of the chief guests stayed on to dinner. Dick was amongst them. He had stayed chiefly at Mrs. Fulton's request and that he might take her home.

"Come in," she said, when they reached her door. "It's not at all late, though beginning things at two o'clock in the afternoon always makes one feel it must be to-morrow morning at least, by ten o'clock. Come in and talk a little. I'm so glad to see my child so happily married; it's such a weight off one's mind. I have scarcely anything but an annuity, you know, and I think he will be very kind to her. You'll still be her friend, Dick? You won't drift apart because she's married?"

"No," said Dick. "At least, I hope not. But she's not likely to need friends, with a devoted husband and a devoted mother."

"What was that you said once about keeping as we were? Just we three?" said Mrs. Fulton. "Of course, that would have been nicest; but, since we could n't, this was the next best thing, and I'm glad it's done. Shall we have some tea? It's such a nice, unhealthy thing to have so late at night. No, don't ring. Hannah will have gone to bed. We will make it ourselves over a spirit-lamp. She always leaves the spirit-lamp ready for me."

"You look very white and tired," said Dick. "Lie down on the sofa and let me wait on you."

“ Very well, and then you can tell Annie afterwards that you did, and that will please her. Is n't it funny? I am speaking as if I were going to die. I have been speaking as if I were going to die all the afternoon. I made one person cry ; but then people always cry at weddings. Once or twice you looked as if you would like to cry yourself. Were you dreadfully bored? All the men at a wedding always are bored to death except the bridegroom. Annie looked pretty, did n't she? ”

“ Yes, very pretty.”

“ Did you notice how carefully Eustace watched her, and how he came and talked to people himself whenever they seemed to be worrying her, and how careful he was to make her eat enough before they went away? ”

“ Yes,” said Dick, shortly ; “ I noticed.”

“ I was watching him so carefully,” said Mrs. Fulton. “ Those are the little things that show whether a man will be a good husband or not. Of course, it would have been too late to do anything in any case. That 's why I was so pleased. It 's such a comfort to know that what one has done is right, after one has done it. I 'm enjoying this tea very much. I felt quite tired.”

“ You look as if a little brandy would do you more good. All this worry and excitement has been too much for you. You must take a long rest now.”

“ Why, Dick, that sounds as if I were going to die, too—quite emblematic, you know. Turn the lamp up

a little, and we can be more cheerful. I think it is quite odd that Ella did not stay up in town for the wedding. She had known Annie so long. I never liked her, you know. It cost me a great deal of effort to allow the friendship, for I don't think her a very nice girl, you know. And then for her not to come to the wedding ! It seems quite ungrateful. I am sure she cannot quite like the prospect of marrying that dreadful Hoxton young man, though I suppose she 'll do it sooner or later. After all, she is so tall that she would have made the procession look one-sided ; and somehow I think the bride should always be the tallest figure at a wedding. Dick, if you did n't like this marriage, you should have spoken sooner."

There was a moment's pause. Dick was still struggling with the lamp ; when he turned it up he answered :

"The great point is that Nan likes it," he said.
"That is the only thing that really matters."

"And it 's such a comfort to me that Mr. Stravil changed his religion. I do hope no one will ever think it a slur on Annie that her husband was once a priest. I never thought of that until now. There are people who might, you know—foolish, mistaken people, I mean. Of course, I would not have consented to the marriage if Eustace had been still a Catholic. At least, not unless Annie had loved him very much."

"She does love him very much, and everything is

just as it should be." He was walking slowly up and down the room, scarcely noting his old friend's gentle flow of careless speech.

"Yes, everything is exactly as it should be, unless you are vexed. Once or twice this afternoon I thought you were, but I suppose you were only bored. I'm glad I was mistaken. Will you put my cup down? Dick, dear, I really think I am dying, after all. Will you wake Hannah and go for a doctor?"

Dick stopped short, with an exclamation that was almost a cry. The words seemed so simple and casual that for a moment it was impossible to believe them. Then some inexplicable change in the delicate face told him that they were true. He hurried up-stairs to find the servant. There were not many rooms to choose from. He hammered at the door he found first, and as soon as a sleepy voice answered he called directions for the woman to dress and go for a doctor, and then returned to the sitting-room. Short as his absence had been, the change was more marked. He could not be sure but that the beginning of it had been there all the evening, only he had not noticed it.

Mrs. Fulton smiled with pleasure when she saw him re-enter.

"Oh, you've sent Hannah for the doctor and stayed yourself. How kind, and how like you! But I meant you to go. It will be very horrid for you."

Somehow it did not occur to him to try and persuade

her that she was not dying. He went to the sofa, raised her head on his shoulder, and held her hand as a son might have done.

The whole catastrophe had come so quickly and so quietly. Dick had no time to feel emotion of any sort: he was only kind and son-like by instinct, as he had often been before when Mrs. Fulton had suffered from what seemed merely trifling attacks of fatigue and lassitude. She lay back on the sofa, talking at intervals in her gentle, foolish way, and very apologetic over the hardship of a young man having to assist at anything so trying as a death.

"It's been a horrid day for you, Dick, dear; the child's wedding in the morning and this at night."

"I'm glad I'm here," he said tenderly. "If you had been alone with the servant I should never have forgiven myself, and Annie would never have forgiven me."

"Oh, yes, she would," Mrs. Fulton answered. "Annie would have understood. She always understood you—better, even, than I did. I only liked you; I never quite understand anything—I mean, never quite so far as you and she do. I'm glad I didn't know what was going to happen, because then, of course, you wouldn't have been here; but if you are sure you don't mind, it's pleasant to have you. You will be able to tell the child that everything is all right, and that I was quite easy about going. You don't think I need be afraid, do you?"

“ I am quite sure you need not.”

“ People say we all ought to be afraid : we are all sinners without knowing it.”

“ That ’s nonsense. You ’ve injured no one, and done your best. Don’t be afraid for a moment.”

“ I ’m not afraid, my dear. I only wondered whether I ought not to be. I never did think God as exacting as some people try to make Him out, but I wish I ’d been a little more careful to teach the child to believe as she ought. I wonder, Dick, my dear boy—I know it ’s a strange thing to ask a smart young man in a beautiful frock coat—but do you think you could say the Lord’s Prayer for me ? ”

He could and did. It was horribly incongruous that the tragedy of death and eternity should lay hold on anyone so simple, and foolish, and gentle, as the frail, sweet-voiced woman in his arms. He could not feel sorry for anyone who was so contented. He could only feel how good and lovable she was, and that she had nothing whatever to fear. He said the words very softly, watching her lips follow his. It was all so much easier than one would have expected. It seemed only a few moments since the sleepy servant had gone out for the doctor. Death was treating the gentle life very gently. Dick, watching every change in the quiet face, was scarcely sure when life left it ; but gradually the features seemed to grow more noble and strong and calm than they had ever been in life. Presently he

laid her head back on the pillow, and went to admit the doctor and the servant. He heard that such a death as he had witnessed might have been expected any time during the past few years.

He walked home through a soft, pleasant rain. As the kindly old friend he had left lying dead had said, it had been a painful day.





CHAPTER VI

COMMUNION OF SPIRIT

EARLY next morning Dick went to call on Mrs. Bailey, to hear where Annie was, and to ask who were the people who ought to be informed of Mrs. Fulton's death. Death had its etiquette as well as everything else, but Dick had no experience of it. Mrs. Bailey would probably be as much at home in the details of a funeral as those of a dance or a marriage. Those managing women had their uses. Since she had been so eager to marry the daughter she might very well be expected to continue her officiousness ; and at this point Dick's real liking for his old friend rebuked his irritation against Mrs. Bailey's managing ways, and he told her of Mrs. Fulton's death as carefully as he could.

Mrs. Bailey was divided between grief and relief. Shocking as was the death of the bride's mother on the wedding night, it would have been worse had it happened earlier in the day, or during the ceremony.

" I thought she looked strange all yesterday," Mrs.

Bailey said. "One or two people noticed it. They thought that she spoke strangely, too. I knew this might be expected, but I had no idea of its happening so soon. Why, I should have asked her to stay here, only my house was full. But for that it might have happened here, in a drawing-room full of people. We danced after you left. We did n't break up till quite late. Still it is horrible to think of her going home and dying quite alone."

"She was n't altogether alone. I was there, you know."

"All the while?"

"Yes; I had gone in for a few moments. When she felt ill we sent for a doctor, but she died before he came."

"My dear Mr. Archer, how very dreadful for you!"

It was Mrs. Fulton's protest against the inappropriateness of his presence over again. It irritated him from Mrs. Bailey; but then everything irritated him from Mrs. Bailey. He said, "Not at all," a little impatiently, and then added:

"Will you write to Mrs. Stravil?"

Mrs. Bailey began to cry.

"Of course someone must," she said; "but I can't. I really can't. Annie was devoted to her mother. She will feel this so terribly, especially at such a time. Won't you write, just to break it to her? and then I will write a day or two later and say how sorry I am."

"Very well. Where is she?"

"Why, that 's the difficulty. We don't know. Don't you? I made sure you would."

"No; of course not. Mrs. Fulton had no time to tell me. It was so sudden, you know; we had only a few moments."

"I thought perhaps Annie might have told you where they were going, since you are such friends. Mr. Stravil would n't tell us. He said they did n't want letters. Why, it may be a week before we hear from them, and then there will be a day or two before our letter reaches them. There must be a trustee, or family lawyer, or someone. I had better go down to the house and see if I can find out, had n't I?"

It was really the only thing to be done, and was exactly what Dick had expected. He received word in the evening that Mrs. Bailey had found all the necessary instructions without difficulty. Mrs. Fulton, it seems, had had some knowledge that death would come to her suddenly, and had made her preparations accordingly.

There was a trustee, an old friend of the family, who lived in the north. He was summoned by telegraph, but was glad enough to leave all the details of the affair to anyone who would undertake their management. Mrs. Bailey fixed the date of the funeral as late as possible, in the hope of hearing from the Stravils, and undertook to let Dick know directly she had their address.

It was only the day before the funeral that a little note from Annie gave the address in a remote Scotch village. Mrs. Bailey was for telegraphing, but Dick protested.

“There is no telegraph office there,” he said. “The message could only be sent on by post, so a letter will reach her just as soon. As she can’t possibly come in time for the funeral, there is no reason in frightening her by a telegram. If you want to give me the work of telling her you must let me write it,” and he wrote.

Annie and her husband had found lovely weather in their little Scotch village. They had a sea at their feet as blue as the Bay of Naples, and the wonderful deep, clear northern sky that seems not to stretch above them like the half of a globe, but to rise up and up from the horizon like the inner side of a tall dome that has its summit in the furthest limit of space. There was snow on the peaks of the hills that seemed close upon them, but they were sitting among primroses and violets, on the ground, with their hats off, and he was fanning her with a week-old copy of the *Queen*.

“I think this is the loveliest place in the whole world,” said Annie.

“It’s an ideal place to be happy in. Why are you laughing?”

“Well, we were n’t very miserable when we had to wait an hour and a half for our train at Aberdeen.”

“ When you say things like that,” said Eustace, “ you make me feel ”—he stopped.

“ Well, what ? ” she said.

“ You ’ll be frightened if I tell you—you ’re such a saint, you don’t like to be loved as much as I love you.”

“ Why, I like to be loved as much as it is possible for anyone to love me. What did I say ? ”

“ You said you could be happy in—well, Hades, with me, or words to that effect.”

“ I did n’t know I said so,” said Nan ; “ but if I did it ’s true. Yes, I suppose if one could be happy in a railway station one could be happy anywhere.”

“ I should n’t be happy in railway stations,” said Eustace ; “ there ’d be such a crowd.”

“ I wonder why you dislike other people so much. I don’t. You ’ve got me and I you just as much in a crowd.”

“ No, I have n’t. I half lose you ; you exist for other people as well as me. Here there are only you and I in the world. It ’s almost as desolate as if you were away when other people are with us.”

“ Would it be very desolate if I were away ? ” asked Nan. “ No, don’t look like that ; I ’m serious, not fishing for pretty speeches. It is n’t like that with me. I should never be desolate even if you were at the other side of the world. It would make me happy always to know you were in the world somewhere and loved me.

I used to be ever so happy, sitting alone, and thinking how we loved each other when we were engaged."

"Communion of spirit," he quoted,

"But I, who am human and weak,
Would give all my income from Dreamland
For one touch of my hand on her cheek."

"That's what's so funny," said Nan, wondering a little. "I always thought it was the woman who liked the petting and coaxing best, and you seem to think so much of it. Sometimes I wish you would n't. Is that horrid of me?"

"Not at all. I love you for it."

"And it's not because I don't love you as much as you love me. I know it's not that."

"If it were, that would be quite as it should be. I should not complain so long as I had you."

"Well, you have me sure enough," she said. "It's so funny to quite belong to someone now. Just think. A year ago I did n't even know you, and now no one else in the world matters at all."

"Say that again," he cried.

"No one else matters at all by comparison."

"That's not quite the same."

"But it will do, won't it?"

"Supposing," he said, "supposing you had to choose between me and everyone else in the world—you won't have to—but supposing?"

“ Why, I had,” she said, “ in church last week, you know.”

He was on higher ground than she. He drew her towards him, almost roughly, till her head lay on his knee, the face turned towards him.

“ You love like a saint,” he said ; “ not like a woman. You make me worship you. It was women like you first made men call marriage holy. You should n't have been married of your free will, in white satin, with a troop of silly bridesmaids. You are out of place. I should have come with a gang of bravos and carried you off by force from a convent. I 'd have done it. Why don't you look shocked ? ”

“ I 'm not shocked. I 'm sure I should not have been in the convent by my own choice, so I should have been glad you carried me off, and thanked God, just as I do now, for letting us be married.”

“ Why drag in God, dear ? ”

“ I did n't mean to. I 'm never going to worry you about religion. Of course—you won't mind my saying this, will you ?—of course I was just a little frightened when I found you did n't believe in anything at all, but I do hope that some day you will find out that—well, that you 've been friends with God all along, like St. Christopher ; and you are better than I am as it is. But when one is as happy as I am, one could n't bear it if one had n't God to thank. You don't mind ? ”

"No. I 'm not superstitious. If I were I would quote a German poem."

"I should n't understand it."

"I 'll put it in English—badly, of course.

Oh, man, thou hast two chambers in thy heart,
And there dwell joy and grief,
Near, but apart.

When sorrow in her chamber wakes and weeps,
Why then joy sleeps.

Wakes joy and sings? Sing soft, for joy's own sake,
Lest, hearing, sorrow wake.

Do you understand that?"

"Not quite."

"When we are very happy it is not wise to call attention to it."

"I don't think you really mean things like that," said Nan.

"Wise woman, make it a rule never to believe your husband means things that irritate you."

They walked slowly down the hill again, and back to their hotel. Dinner was waiting for them, and letters. Eustace took his and gave her one. She saw it was in Dick's hand, and took it with her as she went up-stairs to remove her hat. Eustace following a few moments later found her standing white-faced and horrified with the letter clutched in her hand. She ran to him.

"Eustace," she cried; "Eustace, read this! Mother—oh, read it, dear, and then I need n't tell you."

He began to read Archer's letter. He read it to the end slowly, and without speaking. His silence seemed unnatural at such a time. It troubled Annie.

"On our wedding night," she sobbed; "is n't it horrible?"

He looked up: his face amazed her still more. Emotions she could not read were fighting in it, but grief was not among them. When he spoke, it was almost with defiance.

"It 's a coincidence," he cried; "a mere coincidence. Don't let it frighten you. You don't deserve it."

"A coincidence? Frighten me—of course not. But dear, sweet little mother—and we were so happy and did n't know. Don't you understand we sha'n't see her any more at all? And she would have liked so much to know how happy I was, and how good you were. What did you mean by saying it was a coincidence?"

"Nothing, darling, nothing." Eustace was himself now again, and he took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. "I was too startled to know what I said. I 'm very, very sorry for you, dear, and for myself too. I was fond of her. You remember I was fond of her, and agreed to go back to town next week because she wished us to. Don't cry, dear, don't cry so. I 'll take you abroad and show you beautiful places, and love you so much that you won't miss your mother. You 'll be content to have no one to love but me."

He comforted her, and grieved with her, until she

seemed to forget his strangeness of manner at the first ; coaxed her to eat a little dinner, and was all that the most loving husband could be at such a time.

Later, when she found herself alone, Annie re-read Dick's letter.

“ MY DEAR ANNIE,

“ I am going to break in on your happiness with very sad news. Your dear, kind little mother died last Thursday night. Poor little girl, this is dreadful for you, and I am more sorry for you than I can say, but as for the dear little mother, knowing that you were safely taken care of, she was almost pleased. It seems this might have happened at any time, and her thought was that it might have come when you would have missed her more. She talked to the last about you and your marriage, and had noticed all day little things in your husband's bearing that made her happy about you. When I see you I will tell you almost word for word what she said. I would come now, only a husband is a better comforter than any friend, is n't he? Even a friend who is as sorry as I am.”

Then followed a few details of matters it was necessary for Annie to know, but that was the letter. How like Dick, to know and say every word that would make her loss seem less bitter ! Her mother had died, it seemed, thanking God for her happy marriage.

“ Coincidence ! What a strange word for anyone to use at such a time ! ”



CHAPTER VII

A PARTING

ELLA came back from the Hoxtons' unengaged, after all. Beatrice congratulated her openly.

"I thought you could n't do it," she said. "There's no excuse for a girl over twenty-four marrying for anything but love."

This had been at the end of an early call at the Baileys', when, after hearing of Mrs. Fulton's death, and that the Stravils were in Italy, she had risen to take her leave. Ella had only smiled, and made no answer.

"She means to marry him sooner or later, Bee," said Effie. "I'm sure of it. She's only waiting until the neighborhood stops being surprised at them."

Ella was meanwhile justifying Effie's remark in regard to Mark Scarsdale, and yet at the exact moment the amusement was not altogether on her side. Impressive Ella had one very weak point. She was horribly afraid at crossings. They were Scarsdale's one occasion of triumph. It must be owned he made the

most of them, generally choosing a crowded time, and making the crossing as difficult as possible. This afternoon he had succeeded in making Ella completely lose her temper. She dare not protest among the traffic, but as soon as she had reached the pavement she stood still and said the harshest thing she could think of.

"I would n't marry you if you had fifty thousand a year," she said.

"Fifty thousand pounds! Oh, yes, I think you would."

Mark had stopped, too, and was considering her calmly. She got over her temper quickly, for she knew temper is only becoming as a momentary flash. They walked on a little way, and then she said :

"Well, I would n't do it for less."

"Do you think I don't know that very well?" he said. "Oh, yes, look as surprised as you like. I am in earnest now. Do you think I have n't understood you all this time? Well, I have. You like me. You like me better than anyone else. I've seen you give me up for good again and again in your heart. You have always given me up, in a way."

"Then I wonder you care for me."

"I'm going to tell you why if I can. I know very well myself, but I can't make it plain in words. If you were as heartless as you try to think yourself, I should n't care for you; or if I were too great a fool to

understand you, I would n't care ; but you 're fond of me, and you 've never hidden that ; and you would n't marry me because I 'm poor, and you 've never hidden that ; but if you don't, you 'll be as miserable as I shall, and you could n't hide that either. I dare say you think you did, but you did n't. Do you think that when I knew you were n't going to marry me I should n't have been too proud to hang round you, and take as much as you would give me, if I had n't known you enjoyed it as much as I did ? But it 's gone on long enough now, so I 'm going away."

" I think you 'd better go."

" I know I had better."

" I 've wanted to say something like this often," said Ella ; " only—well—it was n't easy till you began. There are so many of us at home, Mark, and the others are so very ugly. One of the family must marry well."

" Don't forget that I, at least, have n't asked you to marry badly."

" You need n't be brutal."

" Oh, yes, I need—you don't know. Have you any prospect of marrying well ? "

" I don't know—I—I have n't thought about it."

" I don't believe you have ever thought about anything else since you were a baby—except your clothes, of course."

" You seemed to think just now that I had thought about you just a little."

“ Yes, but that was only in relation to clothes and marrying well.”

She looked rather keenly at his handsome boyish face. It told her nothing except that he saw through her, and loved her, and was very miserable. She kept back what would have been a sigh as she answered :

“ You are cleverer than I thought, Mark, but not quite so clever as you think. It is quite true that I always meant—at least I mean hoped—to marry well ; but until lately—and just now—well, never mind that. At any rate, you can’t say I have thought about it definitely.”

“ No, I suppose not. That was because of me. That ’s why I am going away.”

“ This moment, do you mean ? ”

“ Oh, I shall have time to put you in your ’bus first,” he said.

“ Why have you told me this so suddenly ? ”

“ Not for a moment because I hoped you would be upset, or would relent at the last. You need n’t think that. I told you now because you happened to ask me to meet you this afternoon. But for that, I should have said good-bye in a letter.”

“ That would have been unkind.”

“ Would it ? Then I ’m glad I did n’t. I don’t want to be unkind.”

They walked on a little way. Ella turned to him suddenly :

"Had you made up your mind to go the other day when we were talking about Annie's wedding and other things, in the park?"

"Yes; I'd made up my mind as long ago as that, but I had n't found the opportunity. The opportunity came this morning. Here 's your 'bus. Don't look relieved. I know you are. But hide your relief till I 'm gone. It had to come, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Good-bye, Mark."

"Good-bye."

He handed her on to the 'bus and watched her reach the top. Poor boy, he loved her very much, and he did n't know how much of his love was for the lace frills on the iridescent silk petticoat. These things appeal so very strongly to the impecunious.

Ella did not look back. He was right. It had to come, but the words reproached her.

"He was thinking of my little hurt and not his own big one," she thought. "Now, why could n't a man like that have money? It 's a hateful world."

She said it was a hateful world all the way along Notting Hill Road to Bayswater, and then she said that Bayswater was the most hateful place in it, and got down at Queen's Road to save the penny for the short division of the fare. She left the main road and got quite out of sight of the park before she turned a corner into her own shabby street.

As she turned the corner, a thick-set, straight-haired

girl, with an ugliness that bore a grotesque family likeness to her own beauty, cannoned against her, and then drew back awkward and shamefaced.

“Ella!” she gasped, as if anxious to get her defence in between the fault and the reproof; “Ella, Herr Stettin says there’s just a chance of my winning the musical scholarship if I try very hard. I was running home to tell you.”

“If you win it,” said Ella, “I’ll make up that blue-and-white stripy silk you like so much for you to wear at the examination party. Now run home as fast as you can and say I’m coming, and that I hope tea is ready, for I’m dreadfully tired; or, stay—tell them I’m in an awful temper, and they’d better all keep out of the way.”





CHAPTER VIII

GOOD NEWS FOR DICK

THE ministry was still in office. Somehow it had dragged on its existence through the last two months ; a bye-election or two, a little diplomatic victory, and the success of an unimportant bill had enabled it to do so with some small show of credit ; but everyone knew its days were numbered.

When, early one afternoon, a message came summoning Dick to Lord Feltringham's private room some two hours after his usual duties there were over, he had no doubt as to what he was to hear. The prospect of the loss of his appointment had been before him so long that he had ceased to realize that the loss might become a fact. Ever since he left college he had had an income with a prospect of losing it : it was difficult to imagine any other state of things.

Lord Feltringham, who had been talking with two men who had just left, sat down as Dick entered the room. He turned his chair from the writing-table with

an air of relief, almost of emancipation, and signed to Dick to sit opposite him.

“ Well, we ’re going, Archer,” he said, in a tone which might have persuaded even himself that he was glad.

“ Yes ? ” said Dick.

“ Lord ! what a lot of fuss there is : as if it made any difference. Things will go on just the same ; that ’s one comfort. If we all stayed in office and changed our names, I wonder if anyone would know the difference ? I fancy I shall go to Palestine. Just think of it—it is six years since I was free so early in the year. You can come down to Feltringham for a week or so to help me to put things straight first, I suppose ? ”

Dick said he could, and Feltringham continued :

“ I ’ve asked Towton to give you something—a Church and Constitution Defence League secretaryship. I don’t know if you will care for it. It ’s seven hundred a year, and not too much to do. The work ’s not so pleasant as this, but there ’s so little of it. You could work at anything else too—choose your own career, in fact. They won’t want you till October, so you can take a holiday first.”

Dick was looking so astonished that Lord Feltringham began to laugh.

“ You did n’t suppose I was going to take up six years of your life—the very years a young man has the most chance of making his way in—and then cast you adrift ? ” he said.

"It is most awfully good of you," said Dick. "There was no reason why you should do anything at all."

"Ah, well," said Lord Feltringham, "I meant to all the while, you know. You see, I liked you, Archer. I dare say you did n't notice it, but I liked you."

"Oh, yes ; it made things very pleasant here for me. Of course I noticed ; but there was nothing to lead me to expect this. You could n't very well find a secretaryship for everyone you liked."

"Oh, yes, I could," said Lord Feltringham. "You see, I did n't like any of the others."

"Well, thank you," said Dick.

Lord Feltringham looked at him curiously and hesitated :

"Would it have made any difference," he asked, "any difference in any way to your own affairs, I mean, if I had mentioned this sooner ?"

"Not the least, thank you," said Dick.

"I'm glad of that. I should have been sorry if you had told me it would have made any difference. I should like to go to Feltringham by the 2.50 to-morrow. You'll let them know we're coming ? Thanks. Lady Feltringham can't get away till Friday. You are quite sure it would have made no difference if I had told you what I intended to do earlier ?"

"Quite sure."

"It would have made a difference to me at one time

to have known how things would turn out—I was a third son, you know. But one grows out of that sort of thing—one grows out of it. I remember it would n't have been the slightest use to me then if someone had told me one grows out of it. It's very sad to be young, Archer, after one leaves school, you know. One has to do without so much that one wants. One would need seven lives at the least to live one's youth out thoroughly. Well, I need not keep you. There's nothing to do. I believe Lady Feltringham means to ask you to bring her to join me on my travels after the season is over. But probably you have other plans?"

"No, I shall be delighted."

"Then that's all right. I'm very much obliged. It is not many young men who would care to spend a holiday conveying an old lady across two continents."

"Anyone would enjoy taking Lady Feltringham."

Lord Feltringham was pleased and relieved.

"I wanted you to say that," he said; "something like that. On my soul, Archer, Lady Feltringham is the only woman I could have cared for through a lifetime, and yet at one time it would have made a great difference if I had known how things were going to turn out."

They parted. Dick walked home crosswise through St. James's Park. As he neared Hyde Park Corner he remembered he had not called on the Baileys since the wedding, so he turned into their street and rang the bell.

Mrs. Bailey was at home. The room seemed full of girls, all young and pretty. Ella Payne was among them, brilliantly dressed as usual. He made towards her instinctively. Ella always talked so much that a man with nothing to say felt entirely at his ease in her presence. Dick always had less than usual to say at the Baileys'.

Ella began to talk at once, and had been talking contentedly for several minutes before it occurred to her to tell Dick he was looking depressed.

"I have been hearing good news," said Dick.

"Do you know your speeches never have any emphasis?" laughed Ella. "I don't in the least know whether that's a protest or an explanation. Do you mean you are not depressed? or has the good news something depressing in it?"

"I'm not depressed at all. It was only an ordinary answer with no particular meaning."

"Do you know the Stravils are back?"

"No, are they?" said Dick. "I did n't know."

He had been going to tell Ella of his post in the Church and Constitution Defence League, and his projected journey to Palestine, more by way of taking his share in the conversation than because he expected her to be interested in his affairs, but her information saved him the trouble.

"They came back yesterday evening," Ella said. "They are dining here to-night. I wonder how it will all turn out?"

“Better than most marriages, I should say,” answered Dick. “They knew each other pretty well, and knew that they liked each other. I saw a little of Stravil before the marriage : I liked him.”

Ella looked at Dick for a moment and then shut her lips tight and sat looking severe. Mrs. Bailey came across the room and spoke to Archer.

“Nan and Mr. Stravil are back,” she said. “Has Ella been telling you? They are dining here to-night. Will you come, if you are free? I know you very seldom are—at least not until impossible hours; but if you could come it would be nice—like old times, you know. We shall be quite alone, of course. Annie could not come to a party, but I thought she would like to see a few old friends. Young girls always tell me that the coming home from a honeymoon is so dreary.”

“I ’ll come with pleasure,” said Dick.

“They are going to live in Sloane Street,” said Mrs. Bailey. “The nicest part—Cadogan Gardens it is, really. I am glad Annie is well off now. A pretty girl like Annie ought always to have money.”

Ella rose to take her leave as Mrs. Bailey spoke.

“I will see you into a cab,” Archer said to her. “I must go, too, if I am to be back here by dinner-time.”

They left together. It was raining a little, and Ella had a charming wrap which needed careful adjustment. She illustrated Mrs. Bailey’s remark about pretty girls and money much more completely than Annie Stravil

did. He remembered Annie in shabby blue serge ; it was impossible to imagine of Ella ill-dressed.

They went down the street together ; Ella still looked severe, and Archer wondered lazily what was the matter.

“ How does Scarsdale get on ? ” he asked presently.

“ Mr. Scarsdale is out of England. Did n't you know that ? ”

“ Oh, yes. I met him a few days before he left. He said he was going to Africa. Is he there yet, and how does he like it ? ”

“ Why, how can I possibly know, Mr. Archer ? ” Ella asked, with some surprise. “ You don't suppose we correspond ? ”

That was exactly what Archer had supposed, naturally, and he found Ella's dignified surprise interesting, but he said, politely enough :

“ I beg your pardon. I had some sort of an idea that you were friends, I don't know why.”

“ We were,” said Ella frankly ; “ and you and I are friends, I hope ; but I don't suppose you will expect me to write to you if ever you go abroad.”

“ I should think it charming of you if you did,” said Dick.

Ella smiled and looked as if she were going to say something pleasant, but she did n't. She said :

“ Here is the blue 'bus. Will you stop it ? and I will get on to it.”

“ Where does the blue 'bus go to ? ”

“ Horrid places—Notting Hill Gate, Westbourne Grove, Kilburn, if you stop on it long enough ; but I suppose you don't know where that is ? ”

“ I shall see you to-night, of course,” said Dick.

“ No. I 'm sorry, but I 'm engaged. Good-bye. Thanks for taking care of me.”

She got on the 'bus laughing, with a flutter of colors and a flash of shoe-buckles. Archer felt a little irritation. It was so incongruous that anything so brilliant should go on a 'bus to Bayswater.

6





CHAPTER IX

AN AMATEUR GUARDIAN

WHEN Archer reached his rooms he found a note from Annie telling of her return and asking him to call that afternoon. He had missed it by going straight from the office to Mrs. Bailey's, and it was now, of course, too late for calling. He had heard once from Annie since her marriage. She had sent two lines only in answer to his news of her mother's death. "Thank you for telling me. I can't write about it yet"; and then a hurried postscript, "Eustace is very kind." That did n't count. Just now it seemed strange to receive a note from "The Child" on black-edged paper and with a new signature. Things were changing too fast—Annie married; her mother dead. That was quite a different Annie. He half shrank from meeting her to-night.

And he was changed too. He was a man with a safe income and good prospects.

Annie was already in the drawing-room when he reached Mrs. Bailey's. She wore black, of course ;

but she was looking well, and wonderfully pretty ; prettier than he had ever realized. She colored with pleasure as she held out her hand to him.

“ I need n't ask how you are,” he said ; “ you look very well, and very happy.”

“ I am ; both.”

“ I was out when your note came. I only found it when I went home just now,” he said. “ I hope you did n't think me rude.”

“ Why, no ; I thought you had n't got it,” Annie said, “ and so did n't know that I was back in town.”

“ Yes, I knew. I came straight here from the office, and Miss Payne told me you had returned. Is she coming this evening ? ”

“ No.”

“ Oh, no. I remember she said she was engaged.”

“ Did she ? How nice of her ; but it was n't true.” Annie began to laugh. “ She was n't asked. She would n't have come if she had been. Is n't it queer of her, Dick ? She won't know me any more now, because I 've married a priest.”

“ A man who was a priest,” corrected Archer. “ How strange ! She did n't say that to me.”

“ No, that 's what was so nice of her. She said that she would n't say that she thought it wrong to anyone but me. Of course, it would n't matter your knowing, but it was nice of her to leave it to me to talk about her bad opinion of me or not as I liked. Ella is very loyal.

Mrs. Bailey is angry with her—I don't see why. She has a right to her opinions. Everyone has opinions. Why, I have, and I dare say they are as silly as Ella's. Don't you think Eustace looks very well and very happy? "

" Yes," said Dick ; " marriage seems to agree with you both."

Stravil, who had been talking with a sort of deliberate amiability to Beatrice Bailey, seeing himself spoken of, came forward and stood beside his wife. He spoke to Archer with almost aggressive cordiality.

" I 've been taught to regard you as a sort of amateur guardian of my wife," he said ; " and I 'm quite ready to give an account of myself. She does n't look as if I 'd begun to ill-treat her so far, does she? "

" So far I must say appearances are in your favor," said Dick, falling into his humor, but a little surprised at it.

" You are to have a latch-key, or, at all events, the right of entry at all hours, like a factory inspector, and if Annie does n't have enough frocks you are to look into the matter, or if I am out late, you are to inquire how I spent my time."

" Eustace, please don't be silly," said Annie.

Dick laughed, because it was the easiest thing to do. There was something queer about this cordiality ; but then the man's training would naturally account for a good deal of *gaucherie*, and *gaucherie* is always at its worst when trying to seem cordial.

“ Seriously, I hope we shall see a good deal of you,” said Stravil.

“ This is very flattering,” said Dick. “ I should like to be Annie’s guardian, but, unfortunately, I ’m already engaged in that capacity elsewhere. I have just undertaken to go to Palestine with Lady Feltringham when she joins her husband there.”

“ Oh ! what a pity to go before the end of the season,” said Beatrice Bailey.

“ How horrid,” cried Effie, in the same breath, “ to leave London in the middle of June and travel about with an old frump like that ! I thought it was only in books that private secretaries took care of ministers’ wives and things.”

“ Why, it will be delightful,” said Nan. “ Lady Feltringham is n’t a frump, Effie. She ’s a sweet, witty old lady, and Dick is very fond of her. She does n’t want to be taken care of a bit, but she and Dick like to go about together because they amuse each other so well. I am glad, Dick. What a good time you will have !”

“ We are waiting for George,” said Mrs. Bailey, severely, and with the air of one who often waited for George. “ Beatrice, I do hope you will be able to teach George punctuality when you are married.”

Beatrice looked a little worried.

“ She ’ll never manage to teach him punctuality, because she ’s always in time herself,” cried Effie. “ You

ought to manage things so that you are half an hour later than he is, Bee ; that is the only way to cure a man of being late. At least, I know one other way, but— ” she stopped short.

“ Oh ! do tell us,” said Dick.

“ Well, a girl I knew used to meet a man in the reference library, and he was often late and she did n't like it, and he was very particular, so she made it a rule to read books she should n't whenever she had to wait for him. That made him very punctual indeed.”

“ Was he a curate ? ” asked Stravil, innocently.

Effie looked at him with big, innocent eyes for a moment, and said she did n't know. At that moment, Mr. Sutton and dinner were announced. Mr. Sutton had a pleasant, pale face, and a manner like that of a disappointed apostle. He made brief and credible apologies for being late, and Beatrice stopped looking anxious.

Stravil took in Mrs. Bailey. As Dick followed with Annie he told her of his secretaryship.

“ How nice of Lord Feltringham ! ” she said ; “ but then it was only what he ought to do, you know.”

“ Yes ; but it's nice of people to do what they ought to do,” said Dick. “ One has a right to be pleased with them for it.”

“ You'll read for the bar, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes. I fancy that Lord Feltringham had that in his mind.”

“ And you will grow very rich and important.”

“ I hope so, and very dull and contented.”

“ Oh, no ; not dull if you travel about with Lady Feltringham. Shall you be with her long ? ”

“ Not more than a fortnight at most. Then I shall travel a little on my own account. I shall not be back in town until October.”

“ Then this is almost the only time I shall see you till then,” said Nan. “ It all seems very horrid and different, does n’t it ? ”

“ If the world were to stand still, we should all be knocked off it by the shock,” said Dick.

“ Well, but it need n’t go quite so fast.”

“ I don’t think you ’ve much to complain of, have you ? ”

“ Not much. Did you think mine a very short, ungrateful answer to your nice letter ? ”

He had known of course that her mind was on her mother’s death, and the strangeness of coming back to a new home and new surroundings. He realized, too, how much he missed his old friend himself, so he said prosaically that he was quite satisfied with her letter.

“ I liked yours,” said Annie. “ It was a nice letter. I am not going to make you talk about things now. Of course some day I shall want to, and I hope you won’t mind. I ’m glad you were there, Dick. She always liked having you with her so much.”

"I'll talk about it at any time you like," said Dick.
"As I told you, it was n't sad at all."

"Was it at Perugia or at Naples that we met the Westertons, Annie?" Stravil asked across the table.

"At Perugia," said Annie. The Westertons were friends of George Sutton, and had sent messages and a premature wedding present to him. Annie began to give the messages. Archer watched her a little anxiously, as a friend had a right to do.

She was happy enough; there was no question of it. He wondered if Stravil's awkward manners would wear off, or if they would remain, and become as irritating, in time, to the woman who knew his good points, and loved him for them, as they were to mere acquaintances. The chances were that they would wear off. It was only when he was striving to appear at ease that he failed. The man was all right; it was his training that had been amiss. It is only the great lights of the Church or the priests of fiction who are masters of tact and *savoir faire*. Still, however little Stravil's training had helped him, he might have learned more since he had left the Church. He did not appear to be stupid.

Then Archer happened to see the husband's face, as, without looking at his wife, he listened to what she was saying. The love in it was enough to make a man overcome far graver faults than roughness or shyness. Archer found himself speaking to Stravil quite naturally.

Annie was to have a brougham, but it was not bought yet ; so when the evening was over she and Eustace went away in a hansom together.

He leaned back with the sense of relief most husbands feel when a family party—or a party of a family nature—is well over.

“ It ’s been pleasant,” he said, “ and they mean well ; but do you know, I don’t think we will see much of the Baileys in future ? ”

“ Oh, but Eustace, we must. We met each other there. Why should we not ? ”

“ I mean, not more than we must. I like Mrs. Bailey pretty well, and the eldest girl is good and dull enough, but I can’t stand the other. A girl who meets men secretly in reference libraries will get into mischief sooner or later, and I won’t have you mixed up in her pranks.”

“ Was that girl she told us about herself, do you think ? ” said Nan. “ How do you know ? ”

“ I did n’t know. I guessed. I knew there was some flirtation with a curate. When she denied it so innocently, of course I knew.”

“ But Effie means no harm, Eustace ; it ’s only nonsense with her.”

“ I don’t say there is any harm in her, so far ; but it would worry me if you saw too much of her. My dear, you don’t know how precious you are. Promise me you will do as I say.”

“Of course. I know you don't want me to be unkind or ungrateful to old friends, but I 'll promise not to go and meet curates in libraries with her. That 's what you mean, is n't it? She won't ask me to do that, you see.”

Annie was laughing, and her husband laughed too.

“Am I being a Mahometan again?” he said.

“Well, I can't help it in so far as objecting to your associating with frisky young women goes ; but you must admit I do my best in other ways. Did I hear that the immaculate friend is going abroad at once ? ”

“Not quite at once ; in a week or two, and part of the week or two he will be at Feltringham. We sha'n't see much of him.”

“I 'm sorry. I meant it, you know, when I told him I hoped we should see him often.”

“I always said you would like him when you knew him,” said Nan.





CHAPTER X

CONNUBIAL CONFIDENCES

ANNIE STRAVIL was in her own special sitting-room, seated in an uncomfortable chair before the fire, darning her husband's socks.

There was not the slightest need that she should darn them. If they were to be mended at all, there were servants in the house who could have done the work ; but she was darning because it made her feel so domestic and married.

A natural instinct had led Annie Stravil to gather all the relics of her girlhood into her own little boudoir. Her mother's furniture had been sold, but the one or two trifles which had always been her special property were reserved. There was nothing of any value, or of interest to anyone but herself, and she had an idea, without putting it into words, that Eustace would n't quite like to see how highly she prized mementos of a time which did not belong to him. There was a picture or two, portraits of the actors and actresses who had been her first enthusiasms, the uncomfortable

carved chair she sat on, which she had made at school, shabby books that had been her first loves, a silver crucifix that a friend had given her for its beauty, and a small cast of the Venus of Milo which she had rescued from a second-hand shop in a Bayswater slum one day when she had been to see Ella, and was trying to find her way home by a short cut.

These two last were at either corner of the mantelpiece, the one standing on the shelf, which was low and broad, the other hanging on a nail on the wall. Annie sat sewing between them.

There was a knock at the door, and it was opened before she had even time to say "Come in." Her husband stood in the aperture.

"I'm coming in," he said. "It's no use your saying I must n't. I've tried my very best to leave you one corner of the house sacred ; but it's no use. I'm jealous of your closed door : it was getting on my nerves. I want to see what you have here, and what you do here."

Annie flung down her work laughing.

"I did n't know you had any nerves," she said.

"Did n't you? Have I been as clever as that? I thought I'd let you see them once at least. What's this?"

He picked up her work and saw what it was.

"You sweet, good little thing ! what are you doing this for?"

“Pleasure.”

“I ’d no idea you were so clever. I thought the parlor-maid did that. My dear, if I ’d had any notion how pretty your hand looked with a thimble on it, I ’d have come into this room long ago.”

“How do you like it, now you are here?”

“Wait until I understand it. What ’s this? Yourself at ten years old?”

“Yes.”

“You were a nice child, even then. And this?”

“A dear old dog we had. It ’s very bad. I tried to paint it myself.”

“You certainly don’t paint as well as you darn. And this? Oh, I see—a group of prize-winners at your school. Are you there? How ugly girlhood is in the mass! Even you lose your good looks in a group. I don’t like this.”

Apparently he liked the next portrait less. It was a photograph of Mrs. Fulton, and he passed it without a word, and reaching the hearthrug, saw the crucifix, and looked at it critically.

“That ’s good,” he said. “That ’s quite a fine piece of work, but the last thing I should have expected to find here. I thought you were brought up to have a holy horror of anything popish.”

“A school friend sent it me from abroad. I liked it. I fancy my having it used to worry mother a little.”

“ Yes ; I gathered from my talk with her, when she was inquiring into my morals, you know, that my having given up Romanism quite made up for all my other failings, even for not having any other belief.”

“ I don't suppose mother understood that you had n't any belief at all. That was n't the sort of thing mother would ever have understood. You see she believed things in such an easy and pleasant way, she could n't have understood anyone's giving up what made life so comfortable.”

“ Would n't she have let you marry me if she had known ? ”

“ I don't know. So many good women have a curious belief that it does n't matter for a man.”

He sat down beside her and spoke seriously :

“ And you ? ” he asked. “ It would never have occurred to me to ask you, but for that, there,”—with a gesture to the further side of the mantelpiece—“ I did n't deceive you, did I ? You knew the worst of me—in that respect at least ? ”

“ Oh, yes. I knew.”

“ And you were not shocked ? ”

“ No ; it did n't seem to me to matter.”

He looked a little astonished, but not displeased. She went on after a moment, speaking earnestly, almost enthusiastically :

“ Very religious people believe strange things, I know ; but it always seemed quite impossible to me to

think God would be angry with anyone for what he can't help. It is as if He were angry with people for not being strong, or not being able to sing. Would n't anyone rather believe if they had the choice? It is horrible not to believe. I was sorry for you, but I knew quite well that it was all right, that if you—if anyone did his best, it would be all right sooner or later. Did you ever hear the story of St. Christopher?"

"I dare say. I remember you said once that you hoped I was like him. What do you know of him?"

"Just a scrap. I found it in a very Protestant book mother gave me on my birthday. I remember she was a little worried to find there was a story of a saint in it. St. Christopher was a very great fighter, and he said he would only serve the very greatest and bravest man on earth. So he served a wicked lord, who was the terror of the country. But at last this lord fell ill, and was dreadfully afraid to die. Christopher asked why he was afraid, and the great lord confessed that he feared the devil. 'If you fear the devil, the devil must be greater than you,' said Christopher, 'so I shall go and serve him.' He went and served the devil for a great many years; but at last one day the two were riding along a road and saw a crucifix. 'We must turn back,' said the devil; 'I can't pass that.' Christopher asked, 'Why not?' and the devil said it was the sign of Christ, and that he feared it. 'If you

fear Christ, Christ must be greater than you ; I shall go and serve him,' said Christopher. So he went to the convent, and they told him so many hard things he would have to believe that he knew he could n't believe, and so many tiresome things he would have to do gladly that he knew he could only do against his will, that he was sure it was quite impossible for him ever to serve Christ at all, so he was quite in despair, and sat down outside the convent grieving. Then he noticed that before the door of the convent there was a wide, deep river flowing, and it gave a great deal of trouble to the followers of Christ who came to the convent to worship Him. Sometimes they were carried away by it and drowned. So Christopher said that if he could n't serve Christ, at least he could serve the people who did serve Him, and that he would stay there and carry all the people who came to worship at the convent across the river. He did this for years and years, until at last he was old. He had made himself a little hut on the bank, and never by day or night refused to help anyone. At last, one Christmas night, he was awakened by someone knocking at the door, and getting up he found a beautiful child waiting to be taken across the river. He took the child on his shoulder and went into the river. And it seemed the child grew heavier and heavier, until Christopher could hardly carry him, and at last he asked, ' Why are you so heavy ? ' and the child said, ' Because I am bearing

the sins of the whole world,' and Christopher cried out in great joy, 'Am I, then, serving Christ at the last?' and Christ said, 'All the while you have been serving My people you have been serving Me.' I love that story very much."

"Why?" said Eustace.

He only said the one word, but the tone quieted the feeling of awkwardness a reserved person always feels after speaking in earnest. She answered, simply and easily :

"Because it's the story of foolish, blundering people who mean well, and don't know any better. It helped me very much once. I think it one of the most beautiful stories in the world."

"It helped you? Why? Do you mean that there was a time when you did n't believe, or thought you did n't believe?"

"I think," she said, "that there comes a time to most people when everything one has been taught breaks down, and one has to find out what one can believe for oneself."

"Do you mean," cried her husband astonished, "that such a time came to you—a girl, a mere young girl?"

"Yes; it came when father died. I don't know why, only somehow, when I saw him dead, I seemed suddenly to know that I'd never really believed in anything. I remember mother said her prayers that

night. I could n't—it seemed just silly and useless. I was very frightened and miserable and lonely, but I said nothing about it. That seemed the only thing to do. I thought that if there was no God it would be only selfish to disturb people who found any help in believing, and I must just be as good as I could by myself, but it was very horrible and desolate."

"I'm amazed," said Stravil, staring at her. "To think of this tragedy hidden behind a girl's pink and white face!—it takes one's breath away. It was n't a pleasant thing for me to find out—that I'd given up life for a fable. I went to the other extreme. I don't care to remember it. And all the while you were facing this quietly within yourself. You!—shut up in your little white bedroom with your mother at the door; and the same hell found you there."

"Girls generally have to go through it some time or other," she said.

"Were you going through it when I met you at dances—just a pretty little girl in the smartest of frocks—and fell in love with you?"

"No, not then. It was all right with me before I met you."

"Tell me how it came right."

"You'll laugh."

"I dare say. You need not mind."

"Well, then. I was coming home one evening. It was raining. It was one of those evenings when the

whole world seemed soaked through and through, when you can't believe it is true that you ever sat on dry grass and smelt thyme and heard the bees. And a great van came tumbling down a side street just before me, and suddenly the horse's shoe struck a spark out of the wet, drowned road. Somehow the whole world seemed a little less hopelessly dark for that one spark, and I can't in the least tell you how, or why, but it seemed to me that the world—just the natural world we all know of, the fire that comes out of the flint, the life that begins when one reed leans and touches another, the live flower that springs from the thousand-year-old seed in the hand of the mummy—all those things are every bit as wonderful as the story of the resurrection. It did n't seem hard to believe at all. Are you laughing?"

"No, dear, I'm not laughing," he said; "or if I am, it's not because I don't like your story—I like it. I can't accept it myself, but I don't grudge your belief in it. I should say if there were a God, He would seem to love women best, for He makes this world so hard to live in and the next so easy to believe in for them. What was the other story you said was beautiful?"

"The legend of the twelve crowns. It was in Rome, and they were persecuting the Christians. They made them stand naked in the snow on the frozen Tiber, and on the shore there were fires before the images of their

gods, and meat, and hot wine, and any Christian who would come from the ice and offer incense might eat and drink and warm himself and live. Twelve Christians stood on the ice freezing to death. And one of the soldiers of the guard—I like to think that he must have been a big sunburned Briton—saw these men dying of cold in sight of wine and fires, and wondered what in the world made them do it. He thought it quite mad and foolish of them, and a very great pity since they were so brave. But presently he happened to raise his eyes, and saw in the darkness just above the martyrs twelve beautiful angels, each holding in his hands a golden crown ready for the soul of each man as he died. Then, while he watched, he saw one of the angels let fall the crown from his hands and turn away weeping, and while he wondered why, he saw that the courage of one of the Christians had failed, and that he had left the ice and stood by the fire warming himself; and the thought came into the soldier's heart that the angel should not weep, nor one of the twelve crowns be wasted, so he threw aside his armor and his clothing and went and stood on the ice, and died there with the rest."

"And the Christian who broke faith was damned, of course," said Eustace. "Is your story pointed at me?"

"No," said Nan; "of course not. Don't you see, that is the story of love of goodness, and that's just the same thing as love of God?"

“ No, I don’t,” said Eustace ; “ but I ’m quite sure I like you to think so. Yours is a beautiful belief, my dear. I don’t say it ’s better than believing just what you have been brought up to believe, but somehow it seems to suit you, and be in keeping with you, and your quaint mixture of wisdom and childishness, and your pretty medley of a room. It is in keeping with that ”—and he made a gesture towards the crucifix—“ which is good work, and quite in its place in a woman’s room. It does n’t explain that, though,”—and he turned to the Venus : “ that ’s a little out of place, is n’t it? I ’m sure her image was on the bank. It was at her fire the apostate warmed himself, and you have her there above your hearth. My dear, my dear, explain.”

He leaned against the mantelpiece, laughing and watching his wife. She laughed a little too as she answered :

“ My dear Venus? Oh, she does n’t need any explanation. I found her by chance one day in a dirty street. She looked so sad and lost that I rescued her and brought her home in a cab. I love her very much.”

“ Not so much as the crucifix, I hope.”

“ It seems to me we need them both. Between them they express the whole world. One is the gospel of suffering, and the other the gospel of beauty. One says, ‘ Holiness is agony,’ and the other says ‘ Sin is

ugly,' and when one looks at the Venus long one finds that she is as sad as the Christ."

"And when one looks at the crucifix, one says :

Qui viderit mulierem, etc.

Send her downstairs to my study, my dear."

"What does the Latin mean?"

"It means that Venus has n't enough clothes on."

"Oh, Eustace, how horrid! One never thinks of that."

"One does n't, another does; it all depends on the one."

"But, Eustace, not either of us. We are n't either of us that other one."

"My good child," said Eustace, "the one who is n't that one is one in a thousand."

"Well, I know two who don't think things like that."

"Yourself, and what other? The platonic friend? My dear, a husband can't be quite like a platonic friend. I'm afraid you must n't expect that of us. By Jove! talk of friends, here are those chattering Bailey girls; I'll escape them if I have to hide behind the landing window-curtains."

And Stravil made his exit just as Beatrice and Effie were announced.



CHAPTER XI

EXIT A CURATE

BEATRICE and Effie were shown into Annie's room. Stravil might have felt that the energy of his flight was somewhat unnecessary if he had seen how relieved they both were to find Annie alone.

"I do detest a man who, because he is in love with one woman, shows all the others that he despises them for not being that one," Effie declared almost immediately after the engagement. "We can't all be Annie. I know one or two people who would be very sorry if I were Annie, because then I should n't be me, and if you were Annie, George Sutton would n't love you."

"George says that it is only the sensualist, loving only with his lower nature who, directly he is in love with one, takes no interest in the rest," Beatrice had answered.

"Did he?" said Effie; "and what does it mean? It sounds as if there were something improper in it, unless it was an excuse for all that tribe of women in queer hats who help him in his fads; but, all the same,

whatever he meant, I 'm afraid Mr. Stravil is n't nearly as nice as we thought he was before he was in love."

So to-day they were glad of Stravil's absence, and had no hesitation in letting Annie see that they were glad, and the three settled down before the fire for a good feminine gossip.

Beatrice's marriage had been fixed for the spring of the next year.

"They could have been married ever so long ago, only George has so many philanthropic schemes that must be taught to walk alone first," said Effie.

"It 's to be a May marriage, like yours," Bee said. "I do hope it won't be unlucky."

"Mine is n't," said Annie.

"Oh, you are n't superstitious, I know," said Effie ; "and superstitious things don't matter if you 're not superstitious. Pins lying on the ground never brought me any ill-luck till I knew they would, and now they always do. Since Bee made up her mind to be married in May I 've made up my mind to watch her like a lynx all the while she is dressing for fear she puts on anything wrong side out. Not but what it would be more important to watch George, for he 's much more likely to do it."

"You must warn his best man," said Annie, laughing. "Who are to be your bridesmaids, Bee? I 'm sorry I can't be one. Will Ella?"

“ She ’ll be married herself by then, I expect,” said Effie. “ She is staying with the Hoxtons again.”

“ Is there really anything in that ? ” asked Annie.

“ I don’t know,” said Beatrice. “ I think she wants to, because she thinks it would be so wise, and can’t because it would be so unpleasant. We expected she would be engaged when she came back last spring. Dolly Lyndon, who stays down there with the Beauchamps, says the Hoxtons all want it dreadfully.”

“ She thought she could stand them, but found she could n’t in the spring,” said Effie, “ but now she ’s going to try again. Since then the second son, ’Erbert, —he ’s not so vulgar as ’Arry, but then he ’s not the eldest son, and won’t be so rich,—has been married into a county family, and that has given Ella courage. The new wife ’s a very nice girl, Dolly Lyndon says, but very young. They married her to ’Erbert directly she left school, before she had time to choose for herself. I dare say he was quite as nice as the singing masters and dancing masters she ’d been in love with at school, you know. Dolly says she ’s happy enough. She always calls her husband ‘ Charles.’ Dolly asked her why, one day, since his name was Herbert, and she said quite calmly : ‘ Well, you see I was married to him before I knew the family peculiarity with regard to the letter ‘ h ’ ; when I did, as I could n’t unmarry him, I thought the next best thing to do was to call him Charles.’ ”

"I don't believe Ella will do it, really," said Annie.

"Oh, you mean she would think it wrong because she was so particular about—well, so particular," and Effie pulled up short, almost with a snap. "I suppose she is—about early communion and wearing violets in Lent, and things like that; but then she wants money dreadfully. Girls who make their own clothes always do. They get to hate economy so, and the Hoxtons are dreadfully rich. Besides, the neighborhood is beginning to put up with them. Ella would have a pretty good time."

"They are received and laughed at," said Beatrice.

"I'd rather be left out, myself."

"Oh, but there's generally someone received and laughed at in every set," said Effie. "One wants someone to laugh at. That's why people in history had court fools. If there is n't someone who deserves to be laughed at, people laugh at someone who does n't deserve it, and that's always a pity. Dolly says the neighborhood could n't spare the Hoxtons; they provide so much fun. Last winter, at the county ball, Mrs. Hoxton did n't like the crush on the stairs. There was a man behind her who did n't give her enough room for her skirts—last year's skirts, you know. She tells the story herself. 'Ere was this impudent young h'officer on the train of my h'ivory satin, spoilin' it, and I turns round and I says, "'Oo's pushin'? 'Oo's pushin'?' I says; and 'e says, "My name

is Barnes," as polite as you please." "Two or three people called directly they heard that Mrs. Hoxton was telling that story herself."

"Did you say that Ella was staying there now?" asked Annie.

"She was," said Beatrice. "Dolly left her there, but she said she was coming home for Christmas. I should think she would. People like that are always specially horrid at Christmas. They seem somehow to get so very much more like themselves."

"I don't believe that 's the reason," said Effie. "I believe Christmas with her own people is more than an excuse. Ella's own people and Mark Scarsdale are the only people who are really fond of her. The rest of us are only dazzled."

"I 'm fond of her," said Annie.

"You believe you are, to excuse yourself for being dazzled by her beauty. You 're a little like a man sometimes," said Effie, "in spite of your Dresden China face."

"Have I a Dresden China face?" asked Annie anxiously.

"Well, that 's what Mr. Stravil said to mother, when first he saw you. 'Introduce me to the Dresden China girl,' and I wondered whether he 'd be disappointed when he found there was nothing Dresden China about you but your waist and your complexion. You certainly have n't a Dresden China character."

“What would a Dresden China character be like?” asked Annie.

“Oh, all prettiness, and no sense, or strength, or anything to make a man uncomfortable; only prettiness, and nothing else. The sort of thing a man loves very much, and calls womanly and then gets tired of. But he goes on calling it womanly just the same. I remember we were saying, ever so long ago, the night you were engaged, that a woman ought to be married for just being pretty and knowing nothing, and then keep her husband from tiring by showing that she has a character after all. Afterwards, when I saw more of Mr. Stravil, I began to think he was an exception, and that it was a pity your character was in so much stronger coloring than your complexion, because he would be disappointed when he found it out. However, it's all right now. Of course, we know Eustace has not been disappointed in you, but he must have been very much surprised when he found you were n't Dresden China all through.”

“I wish you were engaged, Effie,” said Annie.

“So does Bee, because then I should n't have time to study George Sutton and find out just what he's like. But I'm not, and I sha'n't be. I'm so fond of enjoying myself. I shall just go on having a good time again and again, until at last I get tired and want to be loved and married like other people; and then I shall turn round and find that I am *passée* and in the

shade, and can't find anyone to love me ; and all the disagreeable people will insist there was never a time when I could ; and I shall hate all the girls who can, from the bottom of my heart, and turn into the ordinary spiteful old maid."

Effie ended rather dolefully, and sat silent for quite a minute, looking almost depressed.

"She 's given up the curate," said Beatrice, in explanation.

"Oh, yes: I had to," said Effie. "It would n't keep at the same stage, you know. If things would only keep at the same stage life would be so much nicer. It was at a school treat. I pretended to mother that I was going to see Ella, and I went and poured out tea for little wretches at Putney, and we played games. You know the sort of games : jumping round in rings and singing things and getting hot. There was one of the games—'Poor Jeannie 's a-weepin'.' A girl was put in the middle of the ring, and we all jumped round her singing :

Poor Jeannie 's a-weepin',
Poor Jeannie 's a-weepin',
Poor Jeannie 's a-weepin'

On a 'ot summer's day.

Oh, Jeannie, 'oo are yer weepin' for?
Oh, Jeannie, 'oo are yer weepin' for?
Oh, Jeannie, 'oo are yer weepin' for?

On a 'ot summer's day?

and the little beast said she was weeping for the curate;

so he had to go and stand in the middle and hold her hand while they sang :

Now you 're married we wishes yer joy :
First a girl, and then a boy,
Every year after a son or darter,
And ter live 'appy ever after,

and he looked so hot and idiotic and—that sort of thing so often does happen in curates' families, you know—and I hated him ; and when it was his turn to be asked who he was weeping for, of course I knew he would n't say it was me, and make me go into that detestable ring, but he looked so silly that I just stepped out of the ring and left a message with one of the teachers that I was going home ; and I wrote next day to say I did n't think I was fitted for a clergyman's wife."

" Had n't you been in earnest all along ? " asked Nan.

" No ; of course not," cried Effie. " I only wanted to have some fun. Is n't it horrid that the girls who only want to have fun always meet the serious men, and the men who only want to amuse themselves always get hold of serious women ? Has n't Ella picked out the one person who really cared for her to treat badly ? But that 's worse ; for I 'm sure she cares for him. That makes such a difference."

And while they were speaking Ella Payne, arranged gracefully in one of Mrs. Balham's white satin chairs, was reading a telegram a gorgeous footman handed her on a silver salver.

Come home ; I've answered all the questions.

MAB.

“ I am so sorry, dear Mrs. Balham,” Ella said, sweetly. “ I shall really have to go home for Christmas after all. My people insist on it.”





CHAPTER XII

A CAPITULATION

IT was a miserable day in January. Archer left the office early and began to walk slowly across the Green Park, with the intention of calling on Annie. Then he remembered that it was not four days since he had last called, and that he could not very well go again so soon.

He was a little impatient. A year ago it would not have mattered to anyone if he had called on Nan and her mother three days in the week. He walked on, changing his direction, till he reached Hyde Park Corner. The park was so damp and depressing that he got out of it as quickly as he could, and found himself walking aimlessly among the dull streets on the Bayswater side, and was reminded by the sight of a repulsive-looking confectioner's that he would like some tea, and could not possibly drink what he would find there. He had walked a long way, and did n't in the least know where he was. Suddenly he caught sight of a "blue 'bus," and remembered that Ella Payne, last

time he had met her, had invited him to call, and that there really was nothing against the idea, since the "blue 'bus" suggested he must be already in her neighborhood. In the dull, desolate weather the thought of scarlet satin was pleasant. Ella was a part of associations which were pleasant. He had been seeing a good deal of her lately. He found himself inquiring of a passer-by for the street she lived in and hearing it was close by.

A few moments later he knocked at the door of the house bearing her number, and was curiously startled and interested to find it so mean and shabby. The incongruous always had a charm for him, and Miss Payne and this house presented the acme of incongruity.

Inside things were more in harmony, but still a little unexpected. Miss Payne was at home, in a pretty drawing-room, but she was sitting in the middle of a square of white sheeting working a sewing-machine.

She raised her head, and then rose quickly, looking pleased.

"How nice of you to choose such a dull day to come! You have actually caught me being useful. It seemed such a dull day that I thought if I could not persuade myself I was violently interested in something I could n't bear it, so I 'm sewing."

Her work was some confection of blue-and-white satin, which Archer vaguely connected in his mind with a pleasant evening spent somewhere. He said

the first triviality that occurred to him, and took a seat just outside the limits of the white square.

"Shall you mind if I go on sewing for a few minutes?" Ella said. "I have only a little more noise to make, then I can put the machine away and do pretty work, sewing on bows and things, and they will bring in tea by the time I am ready to be interrupted."

She rose from the machine a few minutes afterwards, and shook out the folds of silk; then she took a comfortable chair opposite Archer, and sat down with her lap full of lace and ribbons.

"This is n't at all the way to behave when visitors come, is it?" she cried, "and a sewing-machine is n't exactly drawing-room furniture."

"But one sympathizes so with your motive," said Archer. "It is a day when one is driven to do something useful to save one's egotism, to convince oneself one could n't be spared—that one is necessary to one's century, you know. I assure you I felt so unnecessary in the Park just now that if I could have made a coat or a pair of boots I would have gone home and made them."

"Rather than come here?"

"Of course—for the sake of being necessary."

"But you might have thought you were necessary to me on such an afternoon."

"Oh, no; the world's not nice enough for one to think anything so pleasant except in very fine weather."

“ Well, no,” she said. “ And, after all, the necessities of life are very dull things. I ’d rather consider you as a luxury. That ’s very much more interesting. Now, after that, don’t you think you ought to say you would rather come here than make the coat? How horrid of you to hesitate! After all, you could n’t make it, and I could make the frock.”

“ I don’t believe you did make it. You are only revising and amending it. I am sure I have seen those blue and white stripes before.”

“ How clever of you to remember! When and where? ”

“ At a party. No, at the opera. You were with someone in a box. I forget who it was, but I knew her. She allowed me to stay in your box through an act, and you talked—which was very wrong of you—but you had that frock on and blue shoes.”

She blushed a little, a very little. Blushing becomingly, just to the right extent and at the right moment, was one of her special gifts.

“ I hope you thought I looked nice.”

“ I did. I was thinking so again just now. It is a pity to spoil such a nice frock even for the sake of a little excitement on a dull day.”

“ Spoiling it—what do you mean? ”

“ Only that I understand and sympathize with your mood. Your revising and amending mean pretty much what the same terms mean in the House. You wanted

something to tear to bits from sheer restlessness. I saw the frock when you held it up. You can't ever wear it again. It is quite half a yard too short for you."

Ella laughed and finished sewing on the last bow.

"Well, at all events, I've had my relaxation," she said, and flung the finished garment behind her on to a sofa. "And I hear sounds of tea, so presently we shall both feel happier."

A big curtain hung across the wall where the folding doors leading to the back drawing-room invariably are in inferior houses. Through the doors, and even through the folds of the curtain, came a murmur of voices and a rattle of cups. Presently the door into the hall opened and an ungainly child with large ears entered, bearing a tea-tray. She looked about thirteen, and awkward for her age, but the tea equipage she carried was dainty and inviting. She set the tray down, brought up a little table to Ella's chair, and arranged her tea-things on it with careful clumsiness.

Ella thanked her curtly. The child bent towards her chair and whispered, "Is it finished?" Ella nodded, and the child creaked out of the room.

The two had tea *tête-à-tête*. Archer knew that Mrs. Payne never left her room, and that her younger daughters were still in the nursery; but Ella was always at her best *tête-à-tête*. It was very pleasant and warm and quiet in the little drawing-room. The murmur and clatter behind the doors, made faint by

the heavy curtains, was no interruption. After tea, when the creaking child had removed the tray, Ella let Archer smoke, and begged him not to think of going until it was time for both of them to consider dinner. She was dining at Lady Mary Calne's. Was he going?

He was n't. He had been invited, but was engaged exactly three doors off, and they began to suggest absurd arrangements for sending in word to each other what the respective dinners were like, and interchanging *entrées* to suit each other's tastes.

They began to feel so friendly that, as Archer lit a fresh cigarette, he found himself wishing that Ella smoked too. Then he remembered her evening gowns. Women who make their appeal to men entirely through the senses rarely smoke. There is too much *camaraderie* in the practice for them.

Ella appealed very strongly to the senses : not in any coarse way, but she inspired a sensation of ease and prosperity and agreeable luxury. Everything about her was dainty and in keeping. Her thimble, he remembered—one of the tools she had used in destroying a silk frock to ward off depression—had a little row of blue turquoises round it ; and he had noticed, too, a little band of shiny pink leather which she wore at the end of her first finger lest her work should leave the slightest roughness on the exquisitely kept nail. She seemed a girl born for an easy, luxurious life. She would be so thoroughly at home in it.

Nothing she said was of the slightest importance, but everything she said was pleasant. Archer had a charming sense of being made love to all that dull afternoon. Not seriously—that was the charm of it—and not vulgarly. It all meant nothing, but it was pleasant. He warned Ella that she would have to tell him when the time came for him to go, for he should stay until she did, and Ella smiled without speaking.

Suddenly—with hysterical suddenness, indeed—the door into the hall was flung open, and a girl a little older, a little plainer, and a little more ungainly than the one who had brought the tea flung herself into the room. Ella started and rose, stretching her hand towards the blue-and-white frock, but before she had time to speak the child had dashed across the intervening space, seized the garment, and flung it across the room with a movement that was not awkward because it was tragic. Her plain face, as she turned again to Ella, was almost grand with the intense tragedy that only childhood knows.

“It’s no use!” she said. “I shall never wear it! I’ve failed! I’m as useless as I am ugly, and I wish I were dead and no more anxiety to you. If I had n’t told you I was sure to win, p’r’aps you’d have married ’Arry after all; but I *encouraged* you not to, and now, instead of that £60 scholarship, everything is just as bad as it was before.”

“You have lost the scholarship?” Ella seemed to

be grasping at the meaning of the other's incoherent words. "Lost it, after all? But you said you had answered all the questions, and none of the others had."

"Yes; I answered them all, but three of my answers were wrong, and a Jew fishmonger girl answered all but two, and her answers were right, and when I played my sonata——"

"You broke down?"

"No!" The child's voice was really terrible in its self-condemnation and despair. "No, I played it all through; but it seemed I'd been practising mistakes all the holidays, and never found them out."

Archer, at the interruption, had risen and drawn back a little. Ella seemed to have forgotten him. Her face was almost as white as the child's, only she looked helpless rather than tragic. Then she slowly began to smile, to smile with a certain amount of cheerfulness and a good deal of kindness.

"Poor Mab! I'm sorry; but you worked very hard, and you did your best. I'm not going to scold you, and I won't let anyone else."

The child looked at her. The blank tragedy left her plain white face, and it grew almost beautiful in the glow of adoring admiration that suffused it. Then she flung two heavy, square-elbowed arms round her beautiful sister's neck and kissed her furiously.

"Mab, Mab, there's someone here!" gasped Ella, and the child released her, glared for a moment at

Archer, gave an ejaculatory "Oh!" that was probably meant as an apology, and bolted from the room.

Ella shook her skirts into place, and, by a visible effort retaining so much of the smile on her lips as was cheerful, turned to Archer and began to speak lightly. Possibly she had never seen so much kindness nor so much respect on any man's face before. The light speech stopped short. She dropped into a chair and hid her face in her hands, sobbing.

"Please go, Mr. Archer. This is the end of our afternoon. I wish you'd gone five minutes ago, when your visit was still pleasant. I don't want you to pity me."

"I don't," he said. "I'm sorry something seems to be the matter, but I admire you more than I can say. I am going because I'm in the way; but if I thought I could help you in the least, I would stay."

"Oh—" She flung out her hands in that last effort of self-control which seeks something to clutch at. Archer was offering his hand in farewell. Next moment he was holding both of hers in it, as he bent over her begging her not to cry.

"You heard—" she sobbed; "you heard—we are all so wretchedly poor, and they are all so ugly and stupid. What is to become of them? You heard what she said. It was true. I thought if I put a bold face on things and went about well dressed, I might marry well and help us all that way; and—yes, I did mean to marry a horrid rich man, but I could n't quite bring myself to

do it ; and when that poor little wretch said she was sure of the scholarship—£60 a year and the rest of her education—I thought prospects were brightening a little. So I came home. And now did you hear what she said? There is no chance of her ever being a musician. She played worse instead of better with practice, and there are four others as ugly and stupid as she is, poor thing.”

Her head had been resting against the back of the chair with the face turned away. She raised it as she ended. She had not been crying long enough for tears to be unbecoming. On the contrary, she looked extremely beautiful, and just pathetic enough.

“And I ’ve only some eight hundred a year at most,” said Archer.

She rose, leaving her hands in his and looking straight at him for a moment incredulously. Then slowly relief and pleasure, and last of all a curiously piquant tenderness, rose into her face.

“Eight hundred a year—and you,” she said. “I think I should be content with that, after all. Besides, you ’ll make much more some day.”

Then she suddenly let her head fall on his shoulder and cried there quietly. It seemed quite natural. He stroked her hair and soothed her as well as he could. When she lifted her face again, she had her hand over her eyes.

“Don’t look at me. I must be very ugly, but I ’m

very happy. Eight hundred a year is n't much ; not nearly as much as I wanted ; but you, a man like you—that 's very much. I 'm going to be different, and deserve it."

" Don't be ' different,' my dear. You 'll do very nicely as you are."

They both began to laugh, and presently there was a crash and a howl behind the closed doors. Next moment they were flung open, the curtains thrust aside, and an excited child appeared in the aperture, screaming :

" Ella, Ella! Joan was worrying Mab because she 's lost the scholarship, and Mab was trying to get away, and knocked over baby's chair, and—oh—" glaring with round eyes at Archer, " oh, I thought he 'd gone!"

" No, he 's still here," said Archer, " and has acquired some sort of a right to pick up the baby. Here, youngster, let 's see if you are hurt."

He had reached the technical " baby " as he finished speaking. She was a large child, three years old at least, and was not hurt at all. She was crying from sheer fright, but, finding herself touched and spoken to by a stranger, was too frightened to cry. Ella soon restored order, and then dismissed Archer graciously, and they agreed to go to their respective dinner parties together. He was to call for her.

When he called, she came out into the narrow hall

looking like a princess. Mab was beside her, composed and cheerful now, but plainer than ever in the dainty blue-and-white frock.

“ Shall you mind if we drop Mab on our way ? ” she said. “ We thought she might just as well go to the school party and see if she can’t enjoy herself.”

“ I shall enjoy myself now,” said the child solemnly.

Ella, too, seemed in the mood to enjoy herself. There was a repose in her look and bearing that was quite a new charm.

They reminded each other about their nonsense of interchanging messages, and wished the idea were practicable.

“ Or we might have an interchange of guests,” suggested Ella. “ I might send the man deputed to take me down across to your party in exchange for you. The girl you have to take in would be glad of the change. Girls always know by instinct when a man is just engaged. He’s so uninterested in them, and it would be very nice for us.”

Ella looked very handsome and graceful as she swept into the light of Lady Mary Calne’s hall. There was a softened, mystified look in her eyes which the man deputed to take her in to dinner found very attractive. It was the result of a curious sort of wonder deep down in Ella’s heart, which she resolutely refused to put into words. If she had done so, the words would have been something like this :

“ What sort of a man is this who, after I 'd been trying my best to fascinate him all the afternoon, surrendered just at the very moment when that beastly exhibition of our family squalor made me give up in despair? ”





CHAPTER XIII

EFFIE'S PHILOSOPHY

ANNIE came into her room early in the afternoon. She had been shopping and was a little fagged. Looking round at the clock, considering whether she would allow herself tea so early, she noticed a big bowl of lilies at the right-hand corner of the mantelpiece. They had not been there when she went out.

A maid entered with the parcels she had brought home with her, and Nan abandoned herself to the delicious occupation of examining her purchases and making quite sure they were as pretty as she had thought them.

But she remembered the lilies, and asked about them.

“Who brought those flowers? No, not the chrysanthemums—those lilies on the mantelpiece, under the crucifix?”

“Oh, yes, I see them, ma’am.”

The housemaid was of a stern, elderly sort, and she glared disapproval at the lilies.

"Of course you see them. I asked who put them there," said Annie, sharply.

"The master, ma'am. He came in here just after you went out."

Annie remembered. Eustace had been a little gloomy and distraught at luncheon-time, and had left her impatiently, although he was not coming back to dinner. An old college friend had turned up in London, so he said, and Eustace had wanted to spend a little time with him. He had been quite impatient and fretful about going, and she had been a little cross with him, too, for his impatience about nothing. Of course she had n't said a word against his seeing his friends. He sometimes seemed to take it for granted she would be exacting and unreasonable, and then to adopt the same tone with her as if she had really been so, and this was a little trying. But the flowers were his peace offering. It was very sweet of him to bring them. She touched the satiny leaves caressingly and then came back to her purchases.

She had just looked at them all twice over, and decided that she was more than satisfied, when Beatrice and Effie arrived.

The first ten minutes of their visit was spent in discussing what Nan had bought, and what they had bought the day before themselves. Then Effie began to talk of Lady Mary Calne's dinner of the night before. Lady Mary Calne was not a very amusing person

in herself, but she was interesting as a new acquaintance and the wife of an old one.

"Ella was there," Beatrice said, "looking prettier than I've ever seen her. She had a black gown, with the shoulders and sleeves of chiffon."

"And it looked as if it was coming right off," said Effie. "It looked as if there was nothing but one thickness of fine chiffon to keep it where it should be. I don't know how she does it. If I wore frocks like that I should look vulgar, and she only looks *chic*. It's a great gift; only nice people never have it."

"Nice people are so seldom *chic*," said Beatrice.

"Ella is nice," said Nan, loyally. "She's silly about Eustace, but she's nice all the same."

"Bee, we must tell her," cried Nell. "We were n't going to, Nan, but I can't keep it in. Ella is engaged to Mr. Archer! Would you ever have expected it?"

"No, I would not," said Annie, a little blankly. "But I don't know why not. Are you sure it's true?"

"Quite sure; it happened yesterday afternoon."

"Did Ella tell you?"

"No—not a single word. She had a queer, surprised look when she first came into the drawing-room, and I wondered what had happened; but I would never have guessed that, and she did n't say a word. I think it was horrid of her, but just like her. It happened in the afternoon. Her sisters knew all about it, and they told Dolly's sister at the school party. Dolly says

Ella's sisters are all horrid, lumpy girls, not a bit like her. We met her this morning in Marshall and Snellgrove's—Dolly, I mean."

"They are step-sisters; that 's why," said Nan. "She 's very good to them, and they worship her."

"Why, that 's what Dolly says," admitted Effie. "It seems one of the Payne children had failed in some exam. or other, and when she was being chaffed about it began to put on frills about her sister's engagement. Dolly said she did it very neatly, and quite crushed the girl who was being disagreeable about the exam. Then Dolly's sister coaxed her for details, and got them. It seems this Payne girl blundered into the middle of the engagement, and then fled into the back drawing-room, and some of them began to fight, or fall over, or something, and then one of them flung open the folding doors and introduced Mr. Archer to all his relations at one fell swoop, and even that did n't frighten him away. He must be tremendously fond of her."

"A man is a poor sort of lover if he won't put up with a few tiresome relations," said Beatrice, emphatically.

"George Sutton detests me—if you mean that," said Effie cheerfully, "and I make up for it by detesting him; but we shall both stop when you are married. I think, from Dolly's account, that Ella's sisters will be much more trying to a man like Dick Archer than I am to George."

"I can understand the engagement much better if Dick did see Ella among her sisters," said Nan. "She 's nicest then. One is surprised to find how kind and unselfish she is."

"Then I call it a great shame!" cried Effie. "It's nothing but the force of contrast, and quite horrid and unfair. Because a hard, selfish cat, like Ella, has one good point, a nice man like Dick Archer is to fall in love with her for it. Why, you and Beatrice go on being good and unselfish all the time, and nobody is so astonished that they fall in love with you."

"That 's rather a strange thing to say to either of us in the circumstances, is n't it?" said Beatrice.

"As for your engagement," cried Effie, "it 's absurd to quote anything George does as if it proved anything. If he does a thing, that goes to prove that no one else will. He 'd think he was n't a real socialist if he did the same things that other people do; and as for Nan, you know quite well that we all agreed Mr. Stravil did n't love her because she was good, but because she was pretty."

"Is that true, Effie?" Nan asked, with a curious anxiety in her face. "What made you think that, I wonder?"

"Oh, because he 's that sort of a man," said Effie. "Mr. Archer is quite different. I can quite believe that he fell in love with Ella because he caught a glimpse of a little kindness among a mass of selfishness;

but he knew you—a good, sweet thing like you, for years and years, and never fell in love with you.”

Beatrice said “Effie,” in a tone of remonstrance. There is something damping to the spirits, even of the least vain woman, in being told flatly that any man is not, and has not been, in love with her, although the statement is true, and although she has no desire that it should not be true. Perhaps Annie looked a little startled.

Effie said, “Oh, well, you know,” in a tone of apology.

“It’s all right,” said Nan, beginning to laugh. “He never did—not for one moment; but that does n’t prove what you say. It only proves that, good or bad, I was n’t the sort of girl that he could fall in love with, and his engagement to Ella proves that she is, and that ’s all quite pleasant and comfortable.”

“But I ’m disappointed,” said Effie. “I thought Mr. Archer would just stay your friend all his life, and never marry anyone else, for your sake.”

“People don’t do these things,” said Nan, looking as matronly as she could : “not in real life.”

“Well, I suppose not,” said Effie ; “but one likes to think that they do ; and, after all, they do sometimes—dull, untidy men who don’t go to dinner parties—but not smart men like Dick Archer. Somehow, one never expects fidelity from a man who makes epigrams.”

“Does Dick make epigrams ? ” said Annie.

"I don't know," answered Effie; "because I'm never quite sure when a thing is only a silly, vulgar pun and when it's an epigram; but his clothes always fit so well, and he is always so beautifully shaved that it comes to the same thing. I wonder when they will be married?"

"I suppose Mr. Archer can marry quite at once," said Beatrice, a little dejectedly.

"Yes, as he is n't a socialist," suggested Effie.

"What an aggravating girl you are!" said Annie.

"Oh, I don't mind," protested Beatrice cheerfully.

"Of course it is aggravating for Effie and mother that I might have a brougham when I'm married if George was n't so thoroughly convinced that the lower orders are his brothers. I used to like him for thinking so before I was engaged to him."

"And now she only likes him in spite of it," said Effie; "and she's beginning to have quite a wifely hatred of her husband's relations."

"I think that's an epigram," said Nan.

"Oh, well—about one's brother-in-law," apologized Effie.

"Ask Mr. Sutton to call here," suggested Annie to Beatrice. "I'd like to know him better. Make him call here with you, and then I'll give a dinner. It's so nice to give dinners of your own."

"He dines very much like anyone else, you know," said Effie. "The butler is still his brother, only they

are not on speaking terms at meal-times because the butler wears a white tie."

"Does n't Mr. Sutton?"

"Sometimes, but that 's different. With him it is claim to a social dignity that he is sure to contradict half a dozen times during dinner ; but the butler's tie is a badge of servitude, and he does n't contradict it. How awkward it would be if he did ! After all, it 's better to have your visitor a socialist than your butler. It 's less noticeable."

"I 'll ask George to call with me one day," said Beatrice, rising to go, and ignoring her sister's criticisms with the calm of habit. "You will like him."

"He 's just the sort of intractable person you can't help but like till he gets engaged to your sister, and keeps her waiting while he runs about after his grubby brothers," said Effie. "He worships her, you know ; but the more he worships her the more he thinks he ought to sacrifice the pleasure of her society to the claims of people who make him feel a little ill."

"Effie, we must go," Beatrice said, and Effie answered, "Oh, yes, we must. Mother has some people coming, and we promised to be back by five, and it 's past that now."

"You 'll tell Ella that you told me, and that I was pleased?" said Nan, as she followed the girls to the landing.

"Oh, yes—that is, when she tells us properly. At

least, not at the time she tells us. We must allow an interval long enough to be supposed to have told you in. That little sneak, Dolly's sister, swore to the Payne child she would n't get her into trouble by telling. It seems she only spoke in a burst of family pride. Little wretches! It would serve them both right to be told of, and sent to bed for chattering ; but it would be a little ungrateful of us to be the *Deus ex*—I forget—the thing that brought it about, you know."

Nan went back to the fire, and sat down with her hands on her lap. The room was fragrant with her husband's lilies. She heard the hall door opened, and wondered if Eustace had come back after all. Next moment she knew the step on the stair was Dick's. He also had found his way some time since to this room. For the first time within her memory she was not quite pleased to see Dick. He had broken something pretty, and she was going to be a little cross about it.





CHAPTER XIV

COMRADES

IT was rather hard to remember to be cross with Dick when one saw him, he was such a pleasant person to look at, so clean and well groomed, so quietly unconscious of having given offence.

"How nice of you to be at home and alone," said Dick ; "you so seldom are."

"Ring," said Annie, "and they will bring some tea. Is it freezing outside?"

"Worse ; it 's snowing. When London is perfect we shall have private entrances to a well-ventilated underground railway from every house over a certain rental, so that one need never go into the streets at all in this weather."

"Why does n't someone write a series of articles, called 'When London is Perfect'?" suggested Nan. "It sounds like the sort of thing they would print in the *Pall Mall*."

"I will," said Dick, "when I am called to the bar."

One is called, I believe, chiefly that one may write newspaper articles."

Annie began to pour out the tea which the servant had brought. Dick waited till she had finished, and then said:

"I have come to tell you some news."

"Oh, I know it," said Annie.

"How in the world——"

"The Baileys have just this moment left me."

"They have an agreeable habit of knowing things," said Dick, with a little irritation; "but I don't see how they knew this."

"Not from Ella," Annie said promptly. "But Ella has younger sisters, you know, and somebody's sister that the Baileys know goes to the same school as they do."

"Oh, is that the explanation?" said Dick. "Well, that's natural enough. You have always been fond of Ella, so I may take it that you are pleased, may I not?"

"No," said Annie, emphatically. "I'm not pleased in the least. I think it's horrid."

"Why?" said Dick.

"Because I thought we were to go on being friends all our lives."

"Why, so we are, are n't we?" said Dick. "But there was a little girl some year or so ago who did n't find friendship quite enough to satisfy her."

"That was different," said Nan. "I would have gone on being quite satisfied with friendship all my life if Eustace had n't come and *made* me be in love and want to be married. I don't suppose Ella did that with you."

"No," said Dick.

"I think friendship is a horrid unsatisfactory sort of thing," said Annie. "It makes people selfish. I know all the time that I am being abominably selfish. I'm just as much ashamed of myself as I ought to be; but you see you came so soon after I had heard the news. The girls had just left. I wonder you did not meet them on the doorstep."

"I did," said Dick; "but I did n't gather from them that they were at all interested in my affairs."

"Then of course you will understand that I had been pretending to them to feel just as I ought to feel, and when you came I was having a rest. In a little while I'd have been ready to say all the right things to you, but just at that moment I was next door to crying because I have lost my friend."

"But you married," said Dick.

"My marriage made no difference," said Annie; "but yours will."

"Why should it?"

"It should n't—but it will."

"Why?"

"I don't know why, but it will. Effie could explain."

She always finds reasons for things. Well, one reason is that Ella won't know me now."

"Not know you? Oh, yes. I remember, you told me so," and he laughed a little. "She's shocked because you married a priest."

"A man who *was* a priest," said Annie, sharply. "You set me right about that once. Don't say it the other way again. I use n't to care, but I do now. Well, Ella cares about that very much. That's one thing that's bound to separate us. You can't be my friend if Ella is n't."

"But that's quite nonsense," said Dick. "Ella has more sense than to keep up such a foolish quarrel. You and she will be great friends."

"As you and Eustace are?" said Nan.

Dick did not answer. It had never occurred to him to consider the possibility of a close friendship with Stravil. Nan was watching him, and laughed a little.

"There, you see! Being engaged has made you quite like an ordinary man, not like a friend at all. You think nothing between women matters at all, and the least thing between men is important."

"The only things that really matter," said Dick, "are the things between men and women."

"That is to say, between you and Ella and Eustace and me, I suppose."

"I did n't quite mean that. I meant between you

and me too. I never supposed this would even irritate you."

"Well, I've owned that it is very wrong of me to be cross," said Nan. "I would n't have let you see that I was if I had had half an hour to grumble in by myself. I do wish you had n't come so soon. I have let you see the very worst of my selfishness."

"You have," said Dick; "but I'm not very much shocked. I'll own, if you like, that I was just as unreasonable when I first heard of your engagement; but you would n't have given up Eustace to oblige a friend, would you?"

"Oh!" Annie looked quite startled. "Oh, you did n't think I meant anything so silly as that, did you? Why, of course, I would n't have said what I did if I had n't been quite sure it would n't make the slightest difference. Why, even if you were the sort of person to do such a stupid thing, I should n't want you to give up a great happiness to save me from a little disappointment."

"Such a very trifling disappointment," Dick said, and then they sat silent a moment or two.

She was very much ashamed of herself, and, coming round behind his chair, laid an apologetic hand on the edge of it.

"Of course it was mean of me. I sometimes think if men knew how mean women are in their hearts, they would n't be able to love us at all, not even the very

prettiest of us ; but it won't be fair, Dick, to think me quite as horrid as the things I 've been saying. There 's a difference, is n't there, between things one really wants to do and the things one can't help thinking ? ”

“ All the difference between being tempted and being a blackguard,” said Dick.

She was a little astonished at the answer, and the tone of it. She moved about the room restlessly for a silent moment or two, and then stirred the fire and went back to her place.

“ Well, then, if we stop being friends I shall be able to think it is only because a married man can't be a friend,” she said ; “ not because you don't care about it.”

“ We shall never stop being friends.”

“ Is that a promise ? ” she asked.

“ No, it 's not a thing to make promises about ; it 's one of the facts of life. Give me a kind message for Ella.”

“ I sent one by Beatrice, and if she asks me to the wedding I shall come, although she would n't come to mine. How beautiful she will look in her wedding dress.”

“ She always looks beautiful.”

“ Always,” said Annie ; “ but still, it would never have occurred to me that you and Ella might like each other.”

"Such very unlikely people like each other."

"But it was n't unlikely when one thinks. I could tell you lots of nice things about Ella, only you would like it better if I leave you to find them out for yourself. She's very honorable, for one thing."

"That's pleasant; but how do you know it?"

"Oh, from something I've just this moment remembered her asking me about—one day when she'd seen us in the park; something silly; but it was nice of her to want to be sure of it all the same, and, of course"—Nan seemed to be remembering the incident in detail—"I ought not to have been surprised at this at all. I ought to have expected it."

"Oh, you are beginning to feel in the state to say the nice things you think you ought to say."

"No, these are true things."

A clock struck, and Nan started a little.

"That means dinner presently. Stay and dine, Dick. Eustace is away, but there will be some dinner. They began by giving me stupid, dull dinners when I was alone, but I promptly made a fuss, and they reformed. I don't have as much as if Eustace were here, but I have quite as nice things. Do stay."

"I can't. I'm going to Westbourne Square this evening."

"Of course, I forgot. You will go there nearly every evening now, I suppose. Give her my congratulations. You'll have to make haste and be a

judge, Dick. Ella will look splendid as a judge's wife. Dick, how very young you look to be engaged !”

She looked equally young to be married, as she smiled her good-bye, and stood watching her friend go, but her face paled a little when she was left alone.

“ It would have come all the same if I had n't been married,” she said ; “ and what would I have done then ? What in the world would I have done then ? ”

Dick dined at a restaurant, and then went on to Westbourne Square. Ella had two of the children with her in the drawing-room, but they scuttled off at his appearance. She was looking wonderfully pretty, and, as usual, had a good deal to say. Presently Dick had an opportunity of giving Annie's message.

“ I was calling on Mrs. Stravil this afternoon,” he said. “ She said very pleasant things, and asked me to bring your share of them to you. She says I must make haste to be a judge, because you would look the part of a judge's wife so well. I think she 's right as to fitness for the part, but I 'm afraid there 's not much chance of your being called upon to fill it.”

“ How did she know about us ? ” asked Ella. “ I did n't want to announce the engagement yet. Did you tell her ? ”

“ The children did the announcing ; some of their schoolfellows told the Miss Baileys.”

“ Then it might as well be in the first column of the *Times*,” said Ella. “ Little gossiping brutes ! Don't

look shocked, Dick. I mean the children, and that's what they are. You must n't think because you surprised us in a moment of emotion yesterday that they are nice children, because they are n't. However, you need n't mind that ; you won't have much to do with them. You saw the worst of us in one tableau yesterday afternoon, but it won't ever be necessary for you to see as much again. You 'll let me keep an eye on them and do what I can still, but you need not. Well, go on, Dick. You went to pay an ordinary call, and found Nan knew all about us."

"No, I had called to tell her."

"I almost wish you had n't gone so soon," said Ella. "It looked a little as if you thought she would dislike it."

"What nonsense !" said Dick. "She is very fond of you. You will go and see her, will you not ? If there is any coldness between you, it is not of her making."

"Poor Nan !" Ella looked very serious indeed. "I'm fond of her, Dick, and very sorry for her, but I can't go and see her."

"Why not ?"

"Because she is living in sin."

Ella was sitting opposite to him, straight up in a stiff chair. She had on a dove-colored gown, with a little white kerchief round her throat; but for her wonderfully dressed hair she might have been an idealized Puritan or a modified nun. She looked very severely

good, and Dick found himself realizing to the full the effect of that scarlet *décolleté* gown of some few months ago, and remembering a certain frisky house party where she had worn it first, and he broke into a laugh.

Ella looked very much more grave when he laughed.

"There is nothing amusing in it," she said.

"Don't you think that was rather an amusing thing for one nice girl to say about another nice girl?" he asked.

"I think it is quite a serious thing," said Ella.

"Well, in one way you are right; it is a serious thing. Do you say it to other people? Your mutual friends?"

"Of course not. Don't you understand, I am fond of Annie, and it's just the same thing to me as if she were not married at all. The church does not recognize such a marriage."

"But that is nonsense," cried Dick.

"Do you know," said Ella, "that you have quite a habit of saying 'but that is nonsense'?"

"There seems every prospect of it growing upon me," said Dick.

He spoke so sharply that Ella, taken by surprise, had to consider a moment. She made up her mind quickly, however, and spoke pleasantly but resolutely.

"This is a matter of conviction with me, Dick. If you made it a cause of breaking off the engagement, I would have to hold to my conviction."

Dick was very much irritated with her. It seemed difficult to believe that a girl of Ella's intelligence should not realize that a man must not break off his engagement because his *fiancée* will not be friends with a young and pretty married lady of his acquaintance. Ella began to look a little pathetic, but he was not much softened.

"I am not in the least likely to do anything so absurd," he said. "I should have thought you would understand that. Let's discuss the matter peaceably. Do you go to church every Sunday?"

"Yes," said Ella.

"Oh, I did n't know. Do you remember the house party at Colonel Leatham's rather over a year ago: the 'Living Pictures,' the gymnastic performances, and so on—the baccarat parties and smoking concerts on Sunday afternoons? Poor little Annie would have been frightened at our rowdiness, I think. Did you go to church then?"

"Yes."

"I was n't aware of it."

"You were in bed. I went at eight o'clock in the morning—here I go at six."

"Does n't it make you very cross all day?"

"Oh, I go back to bed again," said Ella.

"Well, I shall have to give in, I suppose," said Dick.

"My argument was going to be that you had no right to take the view you do of Annie's marriage, because

you are not a religious woman ; but I find you are a very religious woman. I can only say I hope Providence has a sense of humor. Our religion must be so very much harder to bear with than our sins, sometimes.”

Ella was sitting back in her chair with the same pathetic calmness on her face, but her shoulders had the aspect of one who has faced a danger pluckily, surmounted it, and is resting after the effort. Presently she began to look meek.

“ You are going to be my husband,” she said. “ If you order me to ignore my feeling in this matter and go and see Annie, it will be my duty to do it.”

This was so delightfully incongruous that Archer laughed again, but he still felt irritated.

“ Please don’t expect any dramatic behavior of that kind from me, now or at any time,” he protested, “ or you will be dreadfully disappointed. I never ‘ order ’ anything except dinner—and I sha’n’t have to order even that when we are married—shall I ? I ’m afraid you ’ll find me a very tame, ineffective sort of person ; it ’s what I ’ve always found myself.”

Then they let the subject drop and talked of other matters. It was not until Dick was taking his leave that she came near to it again by asking Dick to thank Annie for her message.

“ I ’m really fond of her, and anxious about her marriage,” she said. “ How does it answer, really, Dick ? Is Annie happy ? ”

" Perfectly happy."

" And he ? "

" You saw during the engagement how much in love he was ; you must judge of his happiness by that."

" Do you like him ? " she asked.

" He 's a man one never seems to know any better — I don't dislike him."

" I 'd rather have married Bee Bailey's socialist," said Ella ; " but I 'm glad I had n't to do either. I wonder how it will all end ? "

Archer wondered too. There was a vague uneasiness in Annie's happiness that puzzled him. He heard rumors now and again that Eustace Stravil was not altogether an immaculate husband, but it was unlikely that the rumors, which were no more than one hears of everyone, should have reached her.

The tone Ella had taken with regard to her attitude towards Annie made it quite impossible for Dick to speak to her again on the subject, but he never concealed it from her that he thought her scruples nonsense. When she found he went to the Stravils's as much as ever, she showed that she was not only content, but pleased.

" It will be so nice," she said, " if neither of us ever takes offence at each other's convictions ! "

" It would be nicer if we did n't have any," Dick said, and so the matter dropped.



CHAPTER XV

A MIRACLE OF TACT

MRS. BAILEY, feeling herself, as it were, the author of Annie Stravil's marriage, gave a party to celebrate the anniversary of it. Dick was not present. A previous engagement with Ella stood in the way. So he called in Sloane Street next day, late in the afternoon, and found Nan alone and a little depressed. Her face cleared at his entrance.

"Oh, how nice of you!" she said. "I was just going to ring and say I was n't at home when I heard the door-bell; but I thought it might be you, and so I risked it. There are so few people with whom one can go on being dull, comfortably."

"Am I going to have that effect on you?" said Dick.

"I am not going to make the slightest effort to be lively or good-tempered. Is n't it horrid to be lonely the day after a nice party? One feels in the mood to 'sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings, and talk of worms and graves and epitaphs,'

and say one has indigestion. Won't it be horrid to be old enough and dull enough to have things like that? I feel the foreshadowing of it now. I was struggling with the temptation not to have any dinner. For the first time in my life, I felt feminine yearnings for a chop and a cup of tea."

"That would be more than a foreshadowing of indigestion : it would be a direct means," said Dick.

"Oh, I should n't have eaten the chop, I expect," said Nan. "Stay and dine, Dick, just to encourage the cook, if you are not engaged."

"I'm a little engaged, but I can disengage myself by telegram if you'll let someone take it to the office."

"I was sorry not to be at Mrs. Bailey's last night—on your wedding anniversary," he said, after the message had been sent.

"It was n't the anniversary ; to-day is the anniversary. Men always forget dates, don't they? I asked Mrs. Bailey to have her party yesterday because I thought it would be nice to be alone to-night—and, you see, I was alone, was n't I?"

She gave a little uneasy laugh. Dick did not speak.

"Eustace is n't dining at home, I suppose. He would have been here by now if he had been coming. It's a good thing, is n't it, that men are not so sentimental as women? They would never get on if they were. He was so nice last night, before he had to leave and go to his friend ; people said he was charm-

ing. I 'm sorry you were not there. Lots of people liked him who had n't liked him before."

"I 'm sorry too," said Dick.

"Did you enjoy yourself where you were?"

"I was in the country. It was an engagement of rather long standing. Ella and I were staying a couple of days with some aunts of hers ; I don't know why."

"Oh, I do," said Nan.

"Is it a question of expectations?" asked Dick.

"No, a nicer reason than that," Annie answered. She knew Ella would not have gone to a party given to celebrate her marriage, and it seemed she had prevented Dick from being present lest her absence should be remarked on ; but she did not want to talk about that matter any more to Dick.

"Here is dinner," said she, and they went downstairs.

They were scarcely seated, however, when Stravil entered. Archer noticed that he looked wan and worried and a little ashamed. Those rumors came into his mind with irritating persistence. There was a certain constraint in Stravil's greeting of his wife, but his manner to Dick was cordiality itself.

"We did not see you last night," he said, his voice implying polite regret.

"I was out of town, unfortunately," said Dick.

"We were in our glory," said Stravil. "The house was full of noise and heat and draughts. Annie had

on the most gorgeous frock I ever saw, and I hated my fellow creatures more than ever."

"It was my wedding frock modified," said Nan.
"Had you forgotten it?"

"You did n't look like that on your wedding day."

"Did n't I look nice?" said Annie. "I hoped I did; I wanted to."

"You had enough admiration to satisfy ten women, I should say. I thought it was a new frock; but I put it to Archer, could I be expected to recognize a frock that made you look like a white nun, when bits of it were cut off and your arms and neck were growing out of wreaths of flaming red roses?"

"That sounds as if the frock had been made very pretty last night," said Dick.

They were still engaged with the soup; it was not very good. Eustace left his untasted, with an air of impatience, and drank water as if to keep himself occupied.

Presently entrées followed.

"Where's the fish?" Eustace said sharply to his wife.

"There is n't any this evening," she said.

"Why not? there should be. What's the cook thinking of? Do you want me to have no dinner at all?"

"There are other things," said Nan; "perhaps you will like them. I did n't order any fish. I would have if I'd thought you were coming home. I know

you sometimes dine off nothing else, but then at other times you won't look at it. You are rather a difficult person to order a dinner for, you know."

"Go and see if there is any fish in the house," said Eustace to the servant.

"I dare say there is," said Nan; "I tell her to leave things out when you are away. I hate long dinners when I am by myself. I expected to be alone. I would have shirked dinner altogether if Dick had n't turned up and had charity enough to stay and help me to overcome a fit of the blues."

"Unexpected visitors are always so welcome, especially when they are rare visitors," said Eustace.

"Why, yes. I had n't seen Dick for some time," said Nan.

"And he turned up just when you were alone, and had a fit of the blues," said Eustace. "I call that a miracle of tact."

If he had called it treason or forgery the others could not have been more astonished at his tone. Annie colored, more from shame at her husband's behavior than because his words suggested jealousy, though that was disturbing enough.

"As I gather that if I had n't happened to call, you and Mrs. Stravil would have been dining off tea and chops, or rather tea and one chop, I hope you are very much obliged to me," said Dick. "The casual visitor has his uses."

Stravil was still scowling savagely at stewed sweet-breads, but by this time Annie had regained her composure. Word was brought that there was fish, and it would be sent up shortly. Eustace's temper seemed no better for the news.

"I wonder if Ella will ever sink to tea and chops when you are out, Dick?" Annie said.

She did not look at him, but Dick knew from her not doing so that in her heart she was begging him not to be irritated at her means of answering her husband's foolish fancies. He was not irritated; he supported her promptly, though he had an uneasy feeling that they were both taking exactly the wrong course.

"Ella," he said, "will dine at a restaurant; I am convinced of that. She does n't like tea and chops."

"Miss Payne!" Stravil's interest broke through his fit of temper for a moment. "What's this? I had n't heard. Are we to congratulate you, Archer? You know, of course, Annie. Why was n't Miss Payne at the glorification of us last night? But now I remember, Archer was n't either. I suppose they were better employed; but at any rate she should have been here to-night. You should have asked her."

That was just what Dick had expected, and there was no knowing now how unpleasant an ill-tempered man, dissatisfied with his dinner, might be next moment. He had half a mind to say Ella was out of town or ill. He half wished she was; or, at any rate, he

wished he had been more angry and less amused at her nonsensical prejudices.

“ I had n’t asked anybody,” said Annie. “ I had n’t got over last night, but Dick happened to call and I asked him to stay. I did n’t want to be alone to-night.”

“ Well, I do,” said Eustace, rising. “ I don’t want any dinner at all, I find. No, don’t rise—don’t disturb yourself: I want to be alone. I ’m not hungry—I ’m not well. Excuse me, both of you.”

He left the room with an attempt at a smile and a gesture that might have been meant to pacify his wife’s disquiet. Annie and Dick went on with their dinner; there was nothing else to be done, under the supervision of the butler. They talked as well as they could of indifferent matters. Annie looked angry and ashamed, as well she might, but more puzzled than either.

“ What ought I to do, Dick?” she said at last, when they were alone. “ Somehow, I feel so helpless with him, and so ignorant. It is a queer thing to say of one’s husband, but I know him so little, much less than I do you. If you were angry with me, I would just go and ask you what was the matter. But I seem to know him less and less every day. What is the best thing to do when one’s husband is cross? Ought I to go and knock at his door and ask him to make it up?”

Dick would like to have gone upstairs and knocked the door in, and asked Stravil what the devil he meant

by making such an exhibition of himself ; but he answered according to convention :

“ I suppose you ought : he looked ill. I noticed it when he came into the room.”

When Annie left the table, Dick went to the drawing-room and turned over some magazines. It was some time before Annie joined him, and then her face had the flush that comes from recent bathing in cold water. He did n't grasp the meaning of the flush at the moment, but he saw that she was more disturbed than when she had left him.

“ It is all right,” she smiled. “ He had dined and was n't hungry. He did n't mean to be cross, but he has had a long railway journey to-day, and his head aches awfully. I sometimes don't quite know what I 'm saying when I have a bad headache. He asked me to apologize, and say good-night to you for him when you go.”

“ I think I shall let you say it now,” said Dick. “ You look very tired yourself.”

“ You have had a nasty evening, have n't you ? ” said Annie. “ I 'm afraid it won't encourage you to come again very soon.”

“ Oh, yes : I shall come again very soon,” said Dick.

“ Dick, ought I to tell Eustace about Ella ? ”

“ You did, did n't you ? ” said Archer.

“ Oh, your engagement. Yes, I hope you don't mind. No, I mean about—about the horrid thing she thinks.”

“That nonsense? No—and yet, I suppose he will have to know. I don’t know what you should do.”

“Neither do I. Isn’t it tiresome not to know what one ought to tell one’s husband? There ought to be training schools for marriage.”

Dick could not help her, and as he had the misfortune to know it, he could only take his leave and feel helplessly angry with Ella. Quite helplessly; after the tone she had taken it would have been difficult to discuss the subject with her again, especially as Stravil’s bearing of to-night had made it quite impossible for him to quarrel with her on Mrs. Stravil’s account.

He could do nothing. Annie’s puzzled face followed him down the street reproachfully. There were those rumors. Stravil’s behavior would have been possible to a man thoroughly ashamed of himself and anxious to find relief in wounding his wife. The meaning of Annie’s depression and of one or two things she had let fall in speaking of her husband began to make themselves clear to him. Stravil had not been home all the previous night. Annie had not known where he was, and this had been the first time she had seen him since he had left the party on the excuse of having to see a college friend. More—he was absolutely certain that when Annie had gone upstairs her husband’s door had been shut upon her. She had invented those wifely excuses for him; the time she had been absent she had spent in her room crying.



CHAPTER XVI

A QUESTION OF A DINNER

THE morning after Stravil's outburst of temper he woke up with influenza. This accounted for his conduct to some extent, but, on the other hand, it made a discussion of it impossible. He was too ill for Nan to say as much as she felt she ought to say if she spoke at all, so the incident passed over for a time.

Eustace, ill in bed, was a gentle, tractable person. Physical suffering showed him in a becoming light. After a day or two Nan put off a few engagements and went to Eastbourne with her husband for a couple of weeks' change. It was like the honeymoon over again, only with no sad news at the end of it. They came home both better for the holiday, and in good spirits. As they sat together after dinner, a day or two later, Nan looked through the cards which had been left during her absence, and, finding those of Beatrice Bailey and Mr. Sutton, remembered her promise.

"Eustace, I want to give a horrid little dinner, and ask some people you don't like. I may, may n't I?"

"I suppose so," said Eustace, looking up from his book. "Who are the people?"

"The Baileys and Mr. Sutton—that's the man Beatrice is engaged to—and someone to take in Mrs. Bailey and Effie, and one or two people to meet them—Lady Mary and Mr. Calne. You can take in Lady Mary, and Mr. Calne can take me, and then we need n't have anyone else."

"Well, as you probably posted the invitations the day before yesterday, I may as well give my consent," said Eustace, laughing, and turning a leaf of his book.

He had spoken quite pleasantly, but Annie was a little indignant.

"They are n't even written," she said. "If I'd posted them I would tell you what I had done, not ask if I might do it."

"Then don't post them, dear," said Eustace. "I don't like those girls. The one that is decent is plain, and the pretty one is hopelessly bad style."

"You don't like any of my friends much, do you?" said Nan.

"I don't like them at all," Eustace answered, frankly.

"I wish they were nicer; but then I dare say you would n't like them any better, however nice they were."

"I dare say not," said Eustace.

"We don't seem to have very many friends to choose from, do we? Not so many as other people, I mean.

I wonder why? That makes it more of a pity that you don't like the few that I have."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help it," said Eustace. "I don't love my neighbors much."

"Now I'm quite ready to like all your friends," said Annie; "only, as I say, you're such a misanthrope, you don't seem to have any—except Mr. Carlisle, that college friend you go to see so often."

"Ah! So you do object to him," cried Eustace. "I knew you would; are you not a woman?"

"I don't object at all," said Annie. "I was going to say, why don't you ask him to dinner? What are you being cross about? Why, my dear, you knew the poor Baileys before you knew me. If you had n't married me you'd have been going about to dances with them still: if you had n't fallen in love with Effie."

"*Exaltate Deo*," murmured Eustace under his breath and half laughing.

"What's that?"

"A pious sentiment, my dear. I still remember enough Latin to exclaim it when I feel a pious emotion, and the thought that I had after all escaped a much worse fate made me just a little thankful."

"Tell me why you are being cross," said Nan.

"Because I'm an ill-tempered brute, I suppose," said Stravil, softening, as she sat down on a stool on the rug and leaned her head on his knee. "There's really no other reason."

“ Well—I must have my dinner,” she said, “ because I told Bee I would ; so don’t be crosser than you can help, or I shall wish I *had* sent the invitations without asking you. You did n’t begin to be cross until you saw a prospect of escape ; that was a little mean of you, was n’t it ? They are n’t really horrid, you know ; they are both good and nice in their way, and Effie is clever, if she would ever stop talking long enough for one to find it out.”

“ I ’ve never heard her say anything that so much as suggested cleverness,” said Eustace.

“ No, I suppose not. Now I think of it, she never does in company. She ’s afraid of being thought blue. It is only when she is alone with girls that she lets herself go.”

“ Shall you ask Archer ? ”

“ No,” said Annie.

Eustace looked at her keenly.

“ Are you brooding over my ill-temper that night at dinner ? I thought you had forgotten it.”

“ Well, I had,” said Nan, “ all this nice fortnight we have been having ; but it was bound to come back into my mind when the time came to invite people again—although, of course, it ’s too late to scold or quarrel about it.”

“ Did you want to do either ? I was ill : it ought not to count.”

“ It does n’t between us, but I was very angry all the same.”

"I was n't unkind to you."

"You made me ashamed of you ; that was horrid."

"I was ashamed of myself. I 'd have said so next morning, only I had such a headache I could n't think of anything else. I 'll say so to Archer, if you like."

"Oh, certainly not. That would be much worse ; besides, I did."

"Did what ?"

"Invented nice messages from you, and said you were ill. He 's forgotten all about it by now."

"Did you really do that ?" said Stravil, amused. "I wonder what women would do if lying had never been invented ! I 'm really much obliged to you. You 'd better ask Archer and Miss Payne. Beg Miss Payne not to wear a gown that makes us all nervous, and I 'll undertake to be very agreeable to her. Why, what 's the matter ?"

"I don't want to ask either of them."

"Why not ?"

"Well, Ella won't come."

"Have you quarrelled ?"

"No."

"Don't say she objects to me : we used to be fairly good friends. Have I managed to offend her ?"

"No, I have."

"You ! I don't believe it : a gentle little thing like you ! Why, you don't even know you are offended until you 've had a fortnight to brood over it. I 'm

quite sure it 's the other girl in the wrong. Why are you turning scarlet? Can it be possible you have something on your conscience? "

He spoke as if he would have been very pleased if she had.

Annie thought a moment, and then said quietly :

" She won't be friends with me now, because of our marriage."

" Because of our marriage? But I never paid the slightest attention to Miss Payne."

Annie laughed outright.

" You vain person ! Not that at all ; because she thought it wrong of us to marry."

" She thought it wrong? "

Eustace repeated the words in amazement ; then he said " Ella Payne ! " and began to laugh.

" Ella Payne," he repeated. " That 's the last thing I should have expected. And to think of the low opinion I had of that girl! I did n't know she was a Catholic."

" She 's not ; only very high church."

" Poor girl," he said. " How one misjudges people ! I 'm sorry this prevents our seeing more of her."

" I don't want to see her while she is so silly. But I 'm sorry that she is silly, and that her silliness prevents me from seeing Dick as often as I used."

" Oh, we can dine without him," said Stravil, carelessly.

" I 'm to give the dinner then? "

He put his hand on her hair, and pushed her head back until he could look straight into her face. He looked keenly and lovingly, and then released her with a laugh.

“ I really believe she 's quite honest, and had n't settled her plans without leave, and did n't mean to. Ah, my dear, my dear, it 's a bad sign when a woman won't fib to her husband about little things. It makes one very nervous about the big ones.”

Annie got up and moved very quickly. She was very angry. She and her husband had been on the verge of a disagreement all the while they had been talking, but now she was really offended. Presently Eustace rose and began to walk towards the door.

“ Are you going out ? ” said Annie. “ It 's late, is n't it ? ”

“ Not very. I thought I 'd look up Carlisle for an hour.”

“ Then give him my compliments, and say I want to know if it is he who has taught you to sneer at your wife, for you never said things like that before he came to town.”

Eustace came slowly back from the door. His eyes were on the ground and his hands behind him. Suddenly he stood still and raised his face. He flung out his arms with the abandonment of a child.

“ My darling, forgive me : kiss me ! ”

She kissed him readily enough, for her sharp speech

had been no sooner made than she regretted it ; but she had been hurt, and the hurt ached still. She drew back her face, but with a wistful look in her eyes.

“ Now,” she said, “ I ’ve kissed you three times—be good, and say that you are quite sure that I shall never tell you fibs of any sort, either big or little ones.”

He seized her face between his hands and kissed it again and again.

“ My dear, my dear,” he said ; “don’t you see that it would n’t make the least difference to me if you did ? That ’s the trouble.”





CHAPTER XVII

UNDERSTANDING

ANNIE'S dinner was a success. It was just the right size for sociability, and all her guests enjoyed it. Beatrice Bailey perhaps most of all ; but then she had a special reason for pleasure. George Sutton had spent the fortnight previous to the dinner at Leeds, the scene of his chief and favorite philanthropic institution. She did not see him on his return till they met at Annie's table, and the moment she saw him she noted a change that was for the better. It was not that he wore a linen shirt; he had conceded so much to convention several times before to please her, but then the shirt had always been a little limp of aspect and doubtful about the collar. To-night no one in the room was better starched, and even Archer, had he been present, could not have outdone him in the amount of shirt front visible. His hair spoke the last perfection of a civilized toilet, and his manner to her showed a change even more marked than the change in his appearance. It was not that he seemed to love

her more ; he had always loved her ; but to-night he seemed to have more grace in showing it. Beatrice felt herself growing quite pretty under this new state of things. She began to be as bright as Effie without being as pert, and the climax, to her delight, was reached when George suggested that, instead of going home with her mother and Effie in the brougham, she should allow him to take her himself in a hansom.

There is, perhaps, nothing that pleases a woman so well as quite unnecessary expenditure for her sake. If a man spends what occasion requires, that proves nothing. But a little lavishness, if it is only to the extent of three pleasant, but superfluous, words in a telegram, is evidence of affection that makes every vein in a woman's body tingle with delight. That cab-fare would have paid for at least one number of somebody's encyclopædia for George's " brothers," but it seemed that her society was to count before George's duties to them at last. It might be wrong, but it was delicious. She knew something pleasant was coming, and waited, enjoying the expectation of it. She had not very long to wait.

" Socialism is not a mistake," began George, abruptly, as the hansom started.

" Of course not," said Beatrice. " The idea of it is beautiful."

" That 's just it," said George. " A perfect world would be socialistic ; that goes without saying ; but

socialism needs something more than perfect givers ; it needs perfect takers, and they are very much harder to find."

" I should have thought a great many more people were good takers than good givers," said Beatrice.

" Leave out your adjectives, and you would be right," said George. " Before any man will give half his goods to feed the poor, so to speak, he must be a true socialist ; but any loafer can do the taking, and so one can't get at the right class. I 've had a great disappointment, and I thought I 'd like to tell you about it at once. I have given up my little Utopia at Leeds."

" Little Utopia " was what scornful people called Sutton's Socialistic Institution. Beatrice felt more elated than ever when he used the term ; but she was sorry he had been disappointed, and said so.

" Well, if it was to turn out a failure, it was better it should turn out a failure before I had parted with a considerable portion of my income to make it permanent," said George, cheerfully. " I ought to have taken warning at the first, when the members we started with tried so hard to keep those whom they called their ' inferiors ' out of the institution. I did n't mind their quarrelling ; even socialists are human. But they wanted to be ' exclusive ' ; I did n't. That ought to have shown me I was the only socialist in the club."

“ But did n’t you always know,” asked Beatrice, “ that the commoner people are, the more afraid they are of knowing people a little more common than themselves? ”

“ I thought that was just what socialism ought to cure,” said Sutton, cheerfully ; “ but somehow it does n’t. It was no good my taking down a crowd of cultured men and women to teach them everyone was equal ; they were willing to believe themselves the equal of anybody, but they would n’t admit they were n’t superior to anybody. They passed a vote of censure on me for lowering the tone of the club by admitting factory hands. You ’re laughing—oh, yes, I laughed too. They did n’t know how to move a vote of censure. I had to show them how, and put it in proper form for them, and it was passed by a large majority.”

“ How ungrateful ! ” said Beatrice.

“ Oh, there ’s no gratitude in socialism—I did n’t want that. If there ’s any truth in socialism, the takers have no more reason for gratitude than the givers. What troubled me was that I did so much harm. My idea was they ought to have more amusement. The sort of amusements we have, you know—dancing, and singing, and so on. The concerts were pretty well. They liked the bad music best ; but then so many people like bad music best ; and when the dances grew into fancy-dress balls they were very popular indeed.

But the glamour of fancy dress took the club like a fever. After a little while, the members of the club never seemed to me to be in their ordinary clothes. I can't say I disliked that ; it was picturesque, and why should n't workers look as beautiful as idlers? They did n't, of course ; but still that was n't their fault. They did their best, and their costumes were useful for the Shakespeare readings. 'This was last winter.'

"Well?" said Beatrice.

"Well, the next thing was acting instead of reading—costume again. And the next thing was modern drama—not always well chosen. Of course, I could n't always be there to choose for them, and if they were never to learn to choose for themselves what was the use of the institution? When I went up a fortnight ago for my last inspection I found a deputation of parents waiting to curse me for encouraging the young people to spend all their earnings on finery. One girl was in prison for stealing spangles. Our Hamlet had gone on the stage and taken Ophelia with him—at least they were not on the stage, but they were living together, and hoped some day to be on the stage. Their parents had a good deal to say. They blamed my socialism for the couple's indifference to marriage. I think that was going too far. I admitted that my institution had n't been altogether a success, and that the best thing I could do was to close it. The club, so much of it as had kept fairly respectable, was very

angry, and said I had no right to look back when I had put my hand to the plough. I told them I was n't looking back—I was looking forward. All the same, I might have listened to them if I had not caught them abusing the deputation of parents for not having deferred their censure of me until the institution was endowed and free to act as it pleased. It appeared they would have had a good deal to say to me on their own account afterwards. This settled the matter. I sold the lease of the rooms to the Primrose Club. I 'll put no money out of my hands. You and I can make a fairly good use of it. We will live well within our means, so that when we meet with nice people in trouble we can put things right for them. We shall do just as much good that way, and be more comfortable ourselves."

"We shall be able to have that brougham," said Bee.

"Yes. Did you want it very much all this time, and not say so?"

"No," said Beatrice. "I only wanted to stop people condoling with me for not having it."

"Was that it?" he said. "Well, I am beginning to see that what people say matters more than one would think."

"It does n't matter to the person they say it of," said Bee; "but it matters dreadfully to the person they say it to."

"That 's what I did n't understand before," said George.

He put his arm round her—and although it was dark, and she could only see him dimly, she knew that he understood now and would always understand.

"You waited patiently, and let me find out my mistake for myself. I shall always like to remember that," he said.

"If I had n't," said Beatrice, "you might have given these people up for my sake before you had found them out, and then you would always have regretted them."

He did not speak. He knew the extent of his past folly better even than she. He knew he would not have given up the convictions—he would have given up Beatrice—and the thought of the worth of what he would have given up, as compared with the worthlessness of that for which he would have given it up, was almost too much for him. He did not speak, because he could not.

After a little while they began to laugh over the situation, and agree that they would keep quiet concerning Sutton's change of views. They would not even—as they might easily now do—hasten the date of their marriage, because the triumph of the people who had disapproved of them from the first would be so irritating. There would be something apologetic in owning to having come round to the disapprovers' way

of thinking when they had expressed it so often, and not one person in five hundred knows how to be apologized to. It would be comparatively easy to own "I have been a fool" if one's hearers were not so prone to take the confession as a cue for enlargement on the exact extent and nature of your folly, just when you have found it out for yourself, and are feeling very sore about it.

"Besides," said George, "you would have so much more annoyance than I—just as you have done all along. When I think of the trial I must have been to you——"

"Don't," said Beatrice, interrupting quickly; "don't think of it. I was happy all the while."

"That was because you were good," said George. "I'm glad you are good, but I ought to have made you happy irrespective of your own goodness—and I will now."

He had done it already. It was true that until now she had been happy only because she was patient by disposition and effort, and that is a very trying sort of happiness. The change sent the blood singing through her veins. It made the whole world different. She was no longer a girl to be condoled with, but one to be envied and congratulated. She had noticed even this evening the difference in the manner of her friends towards her. She could have borne the sneers and pity of the whole world for George's love's sake, but it

was very much nicer to have his love and the respect and consideration of the world in addition.

Beatrice was a little commonplace in spite of her love and loyalty — and the simile that occurred to her was that of being well wrapped up in something soft and warm, after standing a long time in a thorough draught.





CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT IS SIN?

WHILE George Sutton and Beatrice were having their explanation, Annie and her husband were sitting on each side of the fire, lounging for a few last moments before ringing for the lights to be put out. Annie threw back her head, struggling with a little yawn.

"Well, it's over," she said, "and it was n't so very bad, was it? You were very nice indeed, Eustace. If you hated it, you did n't show that you did in the least. I hope you did n't hate it very much."

"I'm glad I pleased you," said Eustace.

"You often do, you know."

Annie raised her face, with a little laugh in her eyes as she spoke. She did not mean to be coquettish, but she was charming. Her husband looked at her and spoke slowly:

"I have given up Carlisle for your sake," he said.

Annie was quite distressed. "Given up Mr.

Carlisle," she repeated, "for one cross speech? And I did n't mean it, either. I don't want to separate you from any of your friends. Only it seemed to me, just for one moment when I was silly, that he was separating us. But you need n't give him up, need you? Why not ask him here? I would be pleased to have him come here."

"I would n't," said Eustace. "I know too much to want a tame priest about the house."

"I did n't know that he was a priest," said Annie, surprised. "You said he was an old college friend."

"Well, an old college friend would be bound to be a priest, unless he was an apostate too—a convert, I mean, of course."

"And he is n't?"

"No; certainly not."

"Well, he can't be a very bigoted man, or he would have given you up, would n't he? Were you very fond of him, Eustace?"

"No," said Eustace, speaking absently, "but there were moods in which one liked to talk to him."

"Then don't give him up. Why should you?"

Eustace was leaning back in his chair staring into the fire. He did not look at her as he answered:

"Because I am sorrier for you than for anyone else in the world—unless it's myself," he said.

"Why should you be sorry for either of us?" she asked, surprised.

“ Because sometimes I make you miserable, and because I ought to be miserable myself, and I am not.”

“ Eustace,” she said, perplexed, “ you say such strange things. Why ought you to be miserable? And it ’s not true about me. You make me very happy. Sometimes I ’m a little cross, I know, but when I get older and wiser it will be all right. You see, I did n’t know that people who loved each other ever said things to hurt each other, and you do say things that hurt me now and then : when you don’t believe what I say, and sneer about women as if you meant me ; and then, of course, I try to say something disagreeable back again. I ought n’t to, I know, but I do, although I know all the time that I shall be sorry afterwards. But presently we shall grow out of all that, sha’n’t we? We love each other, and so we must be happy in the end.”

“ That ’s your faith, is it? Have n’t you found out yet that sin is quite the saddest thing in all the world ? ”

“ Sin ? ”

“ I beg your pardon. I meant love. It was a slip of the tongue ; I meant love. And yet, if you read your own prayer-book, you ’ll find there ’s a family likeness between the two. ‘ Has of itself the nature of sin,’ you know.”

Annie drew herself up in her chair, staring at her husband in dismay. Of course she had read and heard the passage he quoted. A great wave of hatred and

disgust of the man who could refer to such words, when they had been talking of love, seemed to sweep her far away from him in one moment.

“ Why don't you face the truth ? ” he continued. “ We love each other : we 've chosen love. There 's no escaping the choice, but what is the good of trying to persuade ourselves we 've done something holy in seeking our own happiness ? ”

“ Have we done that ? ”

Annie did not speak aloud — she could not. She waited a moment for that horrible feeling of disgust to pass off, but it did not. She looked at her husband's splendidly handsome face : it did not please her in the least. She could not separate it from the thoughts that lay behind it.

Next morning was Sunday. Annie woke with a sense of dissatisfaction. She had been tired the night before, so had slept soon and heavily, but her dreams had been disagreeable, though she could not remember them. There had seemed to be a faint, unpleasant savor of wickedness floating in the air all night, and even the sight of a brilliantly fine morning did not quite dispel it. All this time the spring had been creeping on, disguised in a waterproof and umbrella, as it were, unrecognized. Yesterday had been tolerably fine, but Annie had not been out, so had not noticed it; to-day there was no disguise to hide spring's beauty. The Square Gardens were full of it, the air

was almost intoxicatingly fresh, and the moment the window was opened, church bells began to ring.

It was Sunday, of course. Annie remembered that she had not been to church for a long time, and decided she would go. Later, she was to lunch and spend the afternoon with an old school friend who had come to town for a few days.

Eustace had gone out already. There was a nice little pencilled note from him saying that she had been sleeping so soundly that he would not disturb her, and that he hoped she would have a pleasant day with her friend.

Just as she finished reading Eustace's message, a note was brought her from her school friend, postponing the visit.

This was a disappointment. A long gossip with an untroubled girl, who knew nothing of her marriage, and was mentally just where she and Annie had both been a year or so ago, would have been delightful. It would have been such a pleasant holiday. Her own words of last spring came into her mind. She wanted a little holiday from marriage very much just now, and it seemed she would have to come home soberly to lunch as usual, and there would be no holiday at all. She felt as depressed as a housemaid disappointed of her "day off."

Still there was church. It had been wrong of her to neglect church-going all this while. If life was rather

horrid, with little undercurrents of evil everywhere, church was good, and she would go more regularly in future. There was a church near her which she respected immensely because of the splendid work it did among the poor, not only of its own parish, but all over London. She would go there. She would be just in time for the ordinary service if she hurried a little.

She took short cuts through the squares and side streets, and came to the last crossing just as the bells stopped. There was a crossing-sweeper there, and no one was giving him any pennies. It occurred to her to give him one at once, because it seemed such a shame that the glorious weather, which everyone else found so cheering, should be a cause of regret to him. A sharp-nosed girl, very smartly dressed, passed the sweeper as she stopped, saying, virtuously :

“ I never give to a crossing-sweeper on Sunday.”

Annie laughed out aloud. It seemed such a queer way to set about pleasing God by compelling someone else to fast.

“ Then I 'd better give you twopence, had n't I ? ” she said to the crossing-sweeper, and he laughed too. She gave him sixpence, and his delight raised her spirits still further. There was a long row of bicycles chained to the railings. That was pleasing ; it was so exactly what God, as she conceived of Him, would have liked to see.

The service had just begun ; everyone was kneeling.

She walked up the aisle till she saw a bench with plenty of room on it, and then she knelt, too, and, being much in earnest, rose with every shadow of trouble and anxiety gone from her face.

She opened her book and sang with the rest.

A vague sensation of disquiet along the bench disturbed her. She glanced at her neighbor worshipper. He was a young man, and he was crimson with self-consciousness. The person next him, a younger lad, was giggling. She turned sharply; an extremely shocked verger was beckoning to her from the aisle.

She rose at once and followed him farther up the aisle. A good many people turned round and stared, then she was shown into a seat on the other side of the church which was full of women.

Then the situation dawned on her. This was a church where they "separated the sexes."

She felt uncomfortably conspicuous, and could not get her mind back to the service. Why did they "separate the sexes" in church? Was there any authority for it? She could remember none, and she knew her Bible very well indeed.

There was something about the women sitting on one side of the table and the men at the other at feasts, and in a book she had received long ago as a prize at school that told about a Jewish family in a besieged town, the ordinance was explained as because of "the heat of the wine"; the explanation had puzzled her at

the time, and the matter had been dead in her memory ever since. It came to life now, and she understood it, and felt herself turning redder than the self-conscious lads in the seat from which she had been removed.

It was wrong to remember such things in church. It was wrong that one should be made to remember them.

Surely, if there was one place in the world where you should forget one had a body and only think of one's soul, it was in church.

But in this church she remembered the men and women went separately to the communion rails to take the sacrament. Their mind was to be forced back on earthly things at the most sacred moment, and in the most sacred place a Christian can imagine. These lads would go up before their own mother, to learn in the name of God to think less of her than of themselves. Afterwards, when they went into the world, and met the usual temptations to follow their own pleasure and think nothing of the cost to women, they would remember where they had first learned to rate women lower than themselves.

It was the pet idea of the priests, this spiritual inferiority of women. The priesthood he had given up had left its stain on Eustace. Love was sin, or akin to it, and there was something rather wrong about womanhood; which was hard, as one could n't help it. She felt she could understand Eustace better now, after

coming here ; but with the understanding, disgust began to rise again and overwhelm her. She was afraid to understand him. She had come here to escape from that last night's horrible impulse of hatred and disgust of her husband, not to understand it and be confirmed in it. She would n't let her mind dwell on these things ; she had never done so before, she would n't now. It was all very hateful, but she would forget it.

“ Glory be to the Father—— ”

It was no use ; they were in the middle of the psalms, and she had not attended to a word. The vague sensation of evil that had haunted her all last night was closing in upon her now in church, in spite of all her efforts to forget ; there was no escaping it. She suffered the absolute physical pain innocence always suffers when forced to know of the reality of evil. In another moment she would begin to cry from sheer discomfort. She looked round at the door. It was a long way off, but it was open, and the little patch of green outside with the bicycles in a row along the rail gave her courage. At the end of the next psalm she walked unobtrusively down the aisle, and out into the fresh air.

What to do next ? She had come to church for comfort, and because she thought she ought. There was another church near, where the service would be less irritating, but she hesitated. When one has eaten

tainted meat one's impulse is not to turn to what one hopes may be better, but to avoid meat altogether. Then as she crossed the street she gave a little cry of pleasure.

Dick was making for the same crossing from a side street. No one could possibly have looked more in keeping with the clean fragrance of the spring air than Dick did just then. She held out her hand quite eagerly.

"What are you doing down here so early?" she said.

"A good action," said Dick. "At least something I did n't want to do, and that the person for whom it was done regarded as an impertinence. That's a good action, is n't it?"

"It sounds like it," said Annie. "What was it?"

"A young man who is having 'a last chance' in the Colonial Office is n't exactly making the most of it. I happen to know he is going to be pounced on unexpectedly to-morrow, so I thought I'd warn him to be in his place, with some appearance of having done work, or being about to do work. He snubbed me with a most dignified air of being in the right; but that does n't matter: he'll take the warning."

"He is one of the scamps Lady Feltringham is fond of, I suppose?" said Annie.

"One of the most hopeless. She's very fond of him indeed. Why did you come out of church? Were you ill?"

“ No. It 's not a nice church. And it 's such a lovely day ! ”

“ It is a lovely day. ”

Standing in the fresh, bright sunlight in the empty street, the glorious weather seemed to enter into their veins.

“ I thought I was going to spend the whole day with Maisie Gower, ” said Annie, regretfully, “ and I 'm so disappointed ! I got a note this morning saying she was obliged to go into the country. How nice it must be in the country ! ”

“ A day off. ”

She knew his mind had gone back to that talk in the spring. That was what she wanted. The time had indeed come.

“ I wonder if we might ? ”

At that moment an empty cab came round a corner, and stopped with an air of inquiry. That settled the matter. Dick handed her in and said, “ Paddington, ” and there was an end of the discussion. About half way Dick stopped the cab, and, asking her to excuse him a moment, disappeared into a neat-looking house, and came back in a tweed coat and straw hat, with a book under his arm.

“ I 'd forgotten how you were dressed, ” said Annie. “ Do you always leave river clothes at houses on the road to Paddington ? ”

“ No, but I will in future, if you 'll promise to come

out of church at just the right moment," said Dick. "But for the accident of those things being where I left them last week, we could n't have gone till a much later train."

"We can catch a nice early one now."

"Yes, and buy sandwiches and claret for lunch. We can get tea at a lock."

"What 's the book?"

"Oh, that belongs to the coat and straw hat. When we get too lazy to talk we might read to each other."

No two children playing truant from school could have been happier. Not so happy, perhaps—for even children have consciences. They were more like two children unexpectedly sent to play because the school-room chimney had caught fire. It was quite late in the afternoon before either of them began to feel in the least lazy. Then Dick took the canoe under a big chestnut tree and began to read the *Triumph of Time*. He read it in an undertone, as if he had forgotten his companion. At the end, he shut the book and asked if he might have a pipe.

"That 's quite the wickedest book ever written, is n't it?" said Annie.

"I should n't say so," said Dick.

"Well, when one says Swinburne everybody's aunts look shocked."

"I don't know that that proves much."

“ I ’ve liked it always,—as much as you have read to me.”

“ Yes,” said Dick.

“ Well, I want to know if it is wicked or not. It is all about love, is n’t it ? ”

“ Not exactly all. Very nearly all, perhaps, when one considers the *Triumph of Time*.”

“ Dick ! ”

“ Well ? ”

“ Will you bring a quite shocking book—a book you really think I ought not to see—when you come some day—and read it to me ? ”

“ Well, no,” said Dick; “ I don’t think I will. Why ? ”

“ I want to see if I like it.”

“ Very likely you would,” said Dick. “ But that would prove nothing.”

“ It would prove that I was quite shocking by nature,” said Annie.

“ Oh, no. It would only prove that you did n’t know in the least what it was all about.”

“ But if I liked shocking things instinctively, without understanding them ? ”

“ That would only prove what everyone knows already, that there is a certain amount of good in wrong things, and that you understood it quicker than you understood the rest. It would n’t be worth while to read a dull book—you ’d find it dull, you know—just to prove truisms, would it ? ”

Two healthy, vigorous young people went past in a punt. The man was burnt almost black in his flannels ; the girl was sunburnt, too ; even her hands were brown, and her hair was untidy ; but she looked nice, and happy. They were lovers, of course, and very happy lovers. Annie looked at them a little wistfully.

“ This is a nice place to be engaged in, is n't it ? I wonder if it makes any difference whether one becomes engaged here or in a ballroom.”

“ Not the slightest, I should say,” said Dick.

“ Oh, but it might. In a ballroom a girl only looks pretty ; up here they can each find out if the other is nice.”

“ Perhaps they got engaged in a ballroom, and came up here to see if they could stand the test,” suggested Dick.

“ It 's a good test,” said Annie. “ If the man is nice all day, even when your hair gets rough, and your nose a little shiny at the end, he is sure to be a good husband.”

“ Some girls look nicest so.”

“ Oh, that 's just what I mean.”

“ What ? ”

“ Well, if a man likes a girl because she is enjoying herself, he is sure to be a nice man.”

“ That is quite past masculine understanding.”

“ It 's the difference between liking her for his own pleasure, and wanting her to be happy,” said Annie.

“ It ’s as if she had got out of her looks and was going about in her character, and if he thinks she looks nicest so, they ’ll be very happy.”

For a moment she thought Dick was going to answer her quite seriously. But he changed his mind, apparently, for he went on smoking without answering at all. Presently he put his pipe in his pocket and turned to her placidly :

“ Let ’s make paper boats and sail them,” he said.

So they made paper boats, and loitered about the locks, and had tea at an inn, and then drifted slowly homewards in a warm sunset. They only just caught their train by a sharp run to the station. It was close on eight when their cab stopped in Sloane Street. Eustace came into the hall as the door was opened.

“ Dick ’s been taking me up the river,” said Annie.

“ Oh, that ’s where you were all day ? ” Eustace said. He looked at her somewhat dubiously for a second, but his face cleared as he looked.

“ Yes. Maisie wrote that she was going into the country.”

“ I know. I found her letter just now. I ’m glad you were not moping at home all day. You ’ll come in, Archer ? ”

“ Thanks, I ’m engaged.”

“ Well, we know that ; but have some dinner.”

“ I mean, engaged for dinner, in consequence of being engaged in a more general sense,” said Archer,

realizing that Stravil was making himself agreeable, and answering accordingly. "Ella and I are going to spend the evening with Ella's godmother."

So soon as Archer was gone, Eustace laid his hand on his wife's shoulder and looked into her happy, sun-burnt face.

"It's very wrong of you to go off in this way, unchaperoned, you know," he said, speaking in a tone of banter, but of affectionate banter, "but I can't be angry if you come back as fresh and bright as this."

"I'm glad you're pleased," said Nan. "It would have been such a horrid end to such a nice day if you had n't been. I met Dick by accident as I was coming out of church."

"Never mind where you met him," said Eustace. "I'm not jealous. I used to be jealous of Dick, but I never shall be again, now I've seen you come back from a whole afternoon spent in his company, with that child's face. Your eyes are only ten years old."

"I've been about that age all the afternoon," said Nan, happily.

Her husband laughed and kissed her.





CHAPTER XIX

A NEW JOY

ANNIE sat alone in her own room. There was a new wisdom and a new joy in her face. She sat between the crucifix and the Venus. She had said once that one needed them both, the Son of God and the ideal Mother. She understood them both better now, and loved them more than ever. There were no lilies under the crucifix, for her husband was from home, and she never put flowers there herself, because she regarded her husband's doing so as a kindly concession to her belief. To be sure, the grim housemaid, who thought the practice "Popish," had a way of moving them on to a table, but she always knew where her husband had placed them by the damp mark the bowl left — the housemaid's religion being of the sort that expresses itself more in objecting to other people's modes of expression than in inspiring thoroughness in her own duties. She laughed a little to herself. She was very happy. She had been alone all the afternoon dwelling on her happiness, thanking God and praying from sheer fullness of heart.

She hoped it would be a son. A woman's first child should always be a son. She remembered the silly rhyme, "First a girl and then a boy," and the self-conscious curate, and laughed and wondered a little. How could anyone be silly about such a beautiful thing? It was the most beautiful and sacred thing in all the world.

Oh, yes, it must be a son,— a son who would grow up big, and strong, and sunburnt, and very English. She would rather he was not clever. He might be a little stupid, even, if he was kindly, and honest, and manly. She would train him to be very strong and athletic. She would teach him to swim almost as soon as he could walk, and she would try to train herself not to be frightened when he did dangerous things, as a boy should.

She remembered how once, in Kensington Gardens, she had seen a little boy climb to the parapet of the bridge over the Serpentine, and start to walk across on it. When he was half-way across, a lady, his mother of course, came along the footpath and saw him. She stifled a little scream with her hands, and hid behind the bushes that the boy might not see her and lose his nerve. She remembered the agony of terror that woman had suffered. When the boy had got safe across the mother had scolded him.

If it had been her boy, she would not have scolded him. She would have been too proud of his daring to

scold. But it would have been very dreadful to think of his ever doing it again. Perhaps she would have said : " Well, dear boy, I 'm glad you 've done it once, just to show that you are brave ; but now you 've done it once, you need never do it again, need you ? " That would not be scolding. She would try never to scold, nor forbid her boy to do things. That would only make a spirited boy do them and not tell her. She did n't care very much to have him obedient ; she wanted him to judge for himself. When he came to her and said, " Mother, dear, may I do so and so ? " she would say, " Well, dear boy, what do you think about it yourself ? " Of course now and again there would come a matter which he could not decide for himself, or even understand. Then he would trust her, because he would know she was never unreasonable or arbitrary. Children are very just.

She remembered once, when she had been staying at Marlow, she had passed an open window just as two little boys ran up to it and called into the room within :

" Mother, may we go with Jack to fish at the lock ? " and a voice from within had answered, " No, dears ; you know I don't like you to go to the lock. "

The two boys were very disappointed. They looked at each other dolefully ; they were not cross over their disappointment, but surprised. Presently, an idea occurred to one of them, the biggest, and he turned to the window again.

"But, mother, I said, might we go *with Jack?*"

"Oh," said the voice inside, "that's all right, then. I did n't hear that Jack was going. Run away with you."

That was altogether pretty ; everyone concerned in the story was nice. The boys, who knew there must be some mistake if their mother seemed to refuse them a reasonable pleasure, the mother who had brought about that knowledge, and trustworthy Jack. Jack could swim, of course, and the mother knew her boys were safe while he was responsible for them. Jack was a big boy, probably ; but he had been like the others when he was little, and they would grow up like him. Her boy would be like all the three.

She remembered once how, turning a corner in a great hurry to catch a train, she had thrown down a little boy who was running the contrary way. She had helped him up quickly, but he was hurt and breathless, and had to struggle heroically to keep from crying. She had been very sorry, and said so, asking if she had hurt him very much. He had looked up at her, his little face twisted into the oddest grimaces to keep back his tears, and gasped out :

"Well, it does hurt ; but I don't mind when — when it's people like you."

That was a dear boy. She loved him in her memory. Her son would be a little like him too.

Then there was that nice, naughty boy — a

mischievous, dark-eyed scamp. He was teasing a girl beside the round pond in Kensington Gardens. He had taken a stick from her, and the little girl, too angry to beg for it back again, was standing helpless and tearful. Suddenly another boy, fantastically dressed, a typical "mother's darling," dashed to the rescue. He tore the stick away from the black-eyed scamp, and handed it with the grace of a Bayard to the girl. At least he only said, "Here's your stick," but his manner was that of a knight to the rescue. Then he flew back to the first boy, intent on avenging the girl. There would be a fight, evidently, unless their respective nurses left off chattering to each other, and interfered. The "mother's darling" seized the other boy by the collar and began proceedings like an Indian brave, by violent sarcasms.

"Did you enjoy that very much? Was it very clever to bully a girl?" and so on, at some length. She did not remember the exact words of the tirade, but all the while it went on the dark-eyed young scamp, not able to free himself from the clutches of the avenger, was laughing into his face with humorous enjoyment of the whole affair—the rape of the stick, the rescuer's quixoticism, and the impending fight—which he would certainly enjoy, even if he got the worst of it. And while the two looked at each other the small Don Quixote's anger died out, his sarcasms ceased, he loosed his hold. The two stood looking

each other in the face a moment or two, then they went away arm in arm, to get their shoes wet happily in the shallow water. The little girl had been righted and her aggressor defeated ; but that wonderful sex loyalty, that instinct of sympathy between man and man, or boy and boy, made the aggressor and deliverer friends.

That was why men were nicer than women — and nobler. That instinct of sex loyalty was the secret of their superiority. It was something they had which women lacked. That was why every woman in her heart knows a man is her superior, whether she will own it or not. Not, of course, the smaller, contemptible men who say silly things about women ; they are generally as jealous of each other and as spiteful as ordinary girls are, but men such as all these nice boys would grow into — such as her son would be.

Ella had refused to know her because she thought her “ not quite proper ” on account of her marriage. Fancy a man refusing to know another man because he was not quite proper ! Yet Eustace, who had formerly disliked Ella, respected her for the stand she had taken. She had been a little hurt that he should do so, and yet she knew quite well that had another girl done what was as wrong in her eyes as this marriage had been in Ella's, she would have acted just as Ella had acted. That was why she was not angry with Ella. And in a vague way it was why she wished so strongly that her child would be a son.

Some day he would make some woman a wife, a very happy wife, someone a little stronger and cleverer than she was, perhaps, but good and beautiful. She would n't be horrid and cruel to the woman who loved her son, as most mothers are. She would be so nice to her that they could not possibly be rivals. Perhaps her son would love a poor girl, not in his own position, who would worship him, but refuse him because she thought she was not good enough for him. Then her son would tell her all about it, and she would go to the girl and say: "If you love my son well enough to give him up for his own sake, you *are* good enough for him, and you will be wiser to marry him for his own sake, and I have come to beg you to do it." And the girl would understand, and consent, and love her almost as much as she loved her son ; and they would all be happy together, even happier than she was now, happier even than she would be in that moment when they would put her little helpless son into her arms for the first time, and, like the woman in the parable, she would "remember no more her anguish, for joy that a man was born into the world." She was glad she had lived, glad she was married, glad most of all that she was to be a mother.

She was a mother already. That was what was so wonderful. She was a mother already, and her son's life was in her care. She remembered things she had read and heard. If she gave way to temper, or fretfulness, or fits of depression, her son would suffer. If she

let herself get ill or frightened, he would be less strong and brave. It was a pity she had n't known sooner. Perhaps, if she had known sooner, she would n't have been restless and wanted that holiday from marriage. And yet she was glad she had had it—that one day snatched back from girlhood. Yes, before that she had certainly not been herself. She had been irritated with Eustace and puzzled about life. That day had cleared away all the foolish fancies. She would n't have liked her knowledge of this new joy to have come among them. Everything was as it should be. She must be very careful. Her son would never know of it, but all these pleasant thoughts and pleasant memories that had been drifting through her heart would benefit him. It would be better for him that she was glad he was coming. So she slipped out of her chair, and, resting her face on her hands, thanked God from the very depths of her heart.

Presently she heard the hall door opening, and in her pre-occupation was not sure whether the bell had rung or not. She half hoped her husband had returned.

But there were two sets of steps on the stairs, and presently the servant announced Dick.

Dick noted her flushed face and shining eyes, and smiled, pleased that she was pleased about something.

“Is Eustace back, or coming back?” he asked.

“No, I have n't heard from him.”

She stopped short. Eustace had been away for quite a fortnight. He had certainly needed a change for some time previously, but still he might have written to her. However, everything would be much nicer now. Married people were never really happy until they had children. She had always heard and read this, and what everyone believes is generally truer than one would expect. Dick was looking at her with his invariable friendly interest. She would have liked to tell him how happy she was, but that was impossible, of course. There was another woman who would be the only one who would have the right to speak to Dick of such happiness as this. And Ella would not think it a happiness, she would think it a nuisance. She had often said so, and had certainly meant what she said. There was a curious pain in the thought of all this, but she was angry with herself for feeling it. She had no right to expect to stand first with both husband and friend. Then, somehow, she became aware that Dick knew. She raised her eyes and met his. They were very kind and a little pitiful. He touched her hand gently, as he had done many a time when she had a headache or neuralgia.

“ Poor little girl ! ” he said.

And then she understood the wonderful pity and reverence brave and strong men feel for a woman when she is going down alone to the very gates of death for love's sake. She would have liked to tell him that she

was not afraid, but only very glad and proud, but of course, Eustace must hear that first ; so they sat silent a little.

“ Do you know,” Annie said at length, “ that all this time I have never asked you to tell me about mother, and I want to know very much ? You said, you know, that you should n’t mind talking about it, and yet it must have been dreadful for you.”

“ No, there was nothing dreadful. Put that quite out of your mind. It was the sort of death we, every one of us, would choose if we could. It was sudden, certainly, but she knew what was happening, and was quite content that it should happen.”

“ And she was n’t anxious ? ”

“ About you ? No, certainly not. I told you that, you know. She was quite sure you would be happy.”

“ And she was n’t at all frightened ? ”

“ Not in the least. The moment of death is the one moment when nature is kind to us. The dying are the only people who have no fear. They are always content. The dear little mother died as quietly as if she had been going away on a visit. She would have given just the same instructions about taking care of you in her absence.”

“ You are sure she was n’t afraid at all ? I don’t mean about me, or my marriage. But are you quite sure she was not afraid of — of God ? ”

“ Quite sure. She was too good and wise for that.”

“ But a good person might do wrong by accident, and God might be angry.”

“ At an accident ? Oh, no, I think not. Down here we have a right, perhaps, to be angry when well-meaning people blunder, because well-meaning blunders are such a nuisance. But no one’s blunders can hurt God, so I should say He would not be angry.”

She began to laugh.

“ You think so well of God, don’t you ? ” she said ; “ and the people who really believe in Him think so ill of Him ! I ’m sometimes afraid and miserable, but you talk of God as if He were so very reasonable and logical.”

“ I ’m not sure that ’s a proof of disbelief.”

“ No, of course not ; and I don’t know why it should give the impression of it. Somehow, one never expects to hear a man talk about God at all if his clothes fit well. I wonder what God thinks of that ? ”

“ I remember your mother had the same impression,” said Dick. “ It did n’t matter, did it ? ”

“ She said you had no religion, I remember. Do you know, if I had known you believed things, I should have thought it much more terrible that Eustace was an atheist ; and yet, lately, I have not been quite sure that he is.”

At the words, which should have been hopeful, a curious look — that was almost fear — came into her face. Dick spoke quickly :

"Well, your mother was not, and the fact that she was not, helped her. There is nothing in the memory of her death that need pain you, and very much that should be pleasant for you to remember. She was glad I was there, so that I could tell you how happy and peaceful it was ; and I was glad I was there too."

"Does Ella make you go to church?" said Annie.

"Now and again. She is not exacting."

"Are you glad or sorry she is such a strict church-woman? Perhaps I ought not to ask you that."

"I don't believe I have ever thought about it."

If he had thought of Ella's church principles, it was only in relation to the piquant contrast they made with her gowns and her attractive worldliness. Perhaps Annie was thinking of the same thing. They both laughed with the laughter of enjoyment, not ridicule, without asking each other the reason.

"She'll grow out of her exaggerations," he said.

"You knew her well enough to know that."

"She won't grow out of her feeling about my marriage," said Annie, a little sadly. "She is the only one among my friends who had any feeling against it ; but I dare say if I had known more people, she would n't have been the only one. Do you know, Eustace admires her very much for thinking what she does—is n't that strange? I had to tell him, you know—I was afraid he would be angry, but he was n't. He has spoken of it once or twice since. He seems to

think better of her than he ever has before, and was quite afraid that you would insist on her behaving differently. I told him how very unlikely that was. Dick, it will be nice for you, but it will be horrid for me, when you are married."

Dick did not answer ; there was nothing to be said. It was impossible to promise anything for Ella.

" I 'm afraid I 'm not the sort of person to insist that anyone should do anything," said Dick.

He sat watching the feelings that had been exciting her die out and leave her face white and quiet. He wondered if she were afraid. And her husband was away too. He was quite sure she did not even know where he was.

But she did not know that she had any cause to be anxious about him. It could not be certain vague rumors, which he himself had heard, which had brought that strange, puzzled look of anxiety to her face.

Now he thought of it, the rumors were scarcely worth anyone's attention. Stravil when he was at home was loving enough, kind enough, a good fellow. The man's behavior to himself proved it, except for that one burst of temper, which probably was merely the result of influenza. Lately he had made efforts to be agreeable — well meant, if irritating ; and since the spring he had been really cordial, without any effort, apparently. If Annie was sad, it was only with that undefinable, inevitable sorrow that comes of being a

woman, the sorrow that a man can neither help nor understand. So he asked if he might be allowed to smoke, and they opened the window wider, and let the smell of the hawthorns in the Square blow softly into the room as they sat and talked carelessly of things that did not matter.

Presently the sharp double knock of a telegram came in with the hawthorn scent, and next moment the missive was brought in.

“ Expect me to dinner.

“ STRAVIL.”

“ I wonder what they have for dinner ! ” was Annie's comment.

“ What a model wife ! ” said Dick.

“ Ring the bell, will you ? ” said Annie ; “ I must make sure of dinner at once. I always think clear soup 's the best thing after a journey ; it is stimulating. A thick, heavy soup takes away one's appetite when one is tired.”

“ I wonder if Ella will take so much thought for me ! ” said Dick as he rang.

“ I am sure she will. You will have lovely dinners : Ella is so clever. Excuse me a moment.”

Dick waited while she told the servants of her husband's return, and ordered additions to the dinner already provided ; then he rose to go. Five minutes before they had both passively taken it for granted

that he should stay ; but of course he would go now. That was so like him !

She and her husband must be alone, of course, with this wonderful new joy. It would be a festival — the merriest meal they had had together yet. She went out on to the landing with Dick, and as he turned downstairs hurried into her room to put on her prettiest frock.





CHAPTER XX

MYSTIFICATION

ANNIE began to look for the prettiest frock that would be suitable for dining at home with her husband. Which should it be? Not black, nor even the black and white she had been wearing lately. Her mother would be pleased for her to wear colors to-night. One of the frocks she had worn before her marriage would do. Fashion had not changed so much in one year that an evening frock would look dowdy. There was that white one with the little pink flowers on it. Eustace had liked it, and it was nearly new. She made Reynolds put it before a fire to get out any possible creases, and sent to the florist for roses. She meant to look her very best to-night, and then, when she had coaxed some of the loving words from Eustace, the speaking of which always made him as much happier than he had been before as the hearing made her, she would tell him her news, and they would be very happy together.

She had not enjoyed anything for a long time so

much as she enjoyed dressing to please her husband to-night. The last rose was just fastened against her breast when she heard his step on the stairs. Reynolds discreetly withdrew. Annie ran out on to the landing to meet him.

“Eustace, dear, I ’m so glad you ’re home !”

She stopped short, for he had passed her. He was not even looking at her. His hand was on his own dressing-room door.

“Eustace !” she cried, astonished. “Are you not going to speak to me ?”

“I ’m tired,” he said, coldly. “Give me time to breathe ; don’t fly at me the minute I ’m inside the house. Go downstairs : I sha’n’t be long.”

“Eustace !”

“Go downstairs, I tell you,” he repeated. “Don’t worry me now.”

He opened the door, but turned as he opened it. The soft light fell on her startled, white face, her eyes were wide open ; she looked ready to cry like a child from sheer dismay, but she looked very, very pretty.

In a moment Stravil had her in his arms, kissing her passionately, almost savagely. She struggled against his hold, hurt and offended.

“Eustace, I don’t understand you. You spoke as if you were angry with me. If you are angry, don’t kiss me. You must not kiss me and speak as you did. What does it mean ? Let me go.”

" 'There, I 'm sorry,'" and he released her. " 'You should have gone downstairs when I bade you. It 's nothing, my dear. I 'm tired and hungry and ill-tempered. A man always is ill-tempered when he 's hungry. You have been married long enough to know that, I should think.'"

Annie went down to the drawing-room and waited.

" 'Things always turn out like this when one looks forward too much,'" she said miserably.

She made up her mind to be very stiff and dignified with Eustace for a little ; he should not have cause to rebuke her again for being too pleased to see him. But when he came into the drawing-room, he looked so white and worn that she quite forgot her resolve.

" 'I 'm glad you 're back, dear,'" she said, pleasantly. " 'Here is Edwards ; let us go to dinner, and I won't worry you to tell me where you have been all this time, until you are half way through the fish at least.'"

She meant to keep her word, too. It was her husband who spoke first.

" 'Have you been dull all this time ? '" he asked.

" 'Well, a little. The Wyndhams gave a party that was rather nice, and I 've read some new books. Dick has been here once or twice. He was here when your telegram came.'"

" 'When are he and Miss Payne to be married ? '"

" 'I don't know. I don't think the date is fixed yet.'"

“ It ’s a pity she should marry,” said Eustace. “ I hope he ’ll appreciate her.”

“ I hope she will be nice to him,” said Annie. “ He will make such a good husband.”

“ That ’s the one criterion by which women judge men, I suppose,” said Eustace.

“ Well, it ’s what concerns us most,” she answered.

“ A good husband ! That ’s all you ask. A man may be a bad soldier — a bad ruler — false to his honor — false to his convictions. What would you care if he satisfied your requirements ? And yet we fools of men get hold of the notion that you are angels — guardian angels, exalting us, ennobling us. The devil was very clever when he invented that fallacy — it makes things so easy for you ! ”

“ Was it the devil ? ” asked Annie, with spirit. “ I thought it was men themselves. At any rate, it was not women. We never say we are better than men by nature ; we know it is wiser to try to be, that ’s all.”

And then she remembered why. How God, and nature as God made it, had ordained that Eustace’s fit of temper should only vex himself and her for a moment ; but if she were to be angry, or gloomy, or irritable, the man who was to take his life from hers would suffer. And at the thought, all her resentment was gone. Her face changed from pale to red, her eyes softened and darkened with tenderness.

She turned to her husband, stretching her arm along the table till the tips of her fingers could just touch his hand.

“ Don't let 's be cross with each other, dear,” she said. “ I am going to make you so happy! There is something — something—— ”

Her voice died away. Her husband was staring at her with eyes in which some evil she could not understand struggled with intense revulsion.

“ Cover your flesh !” he cried. “ Take a handkerchief — your serviette, anything — take your hand away — sit up—— ”

“ Eustace! ”

She cried the name under her breath, shrinking back into her seat, overwhelmed with shame. That a man should speak to her so — any man ! But her husband ! She could not answer.

The servant re-entered with the next course. Her husband refused it, so did she. She sat silent, her face set and her eyes bent on the bowl of flowers before her. She would not look at her husband.

Her flesh ! Never in all her life had she thought of her pretty, soft neck and arms by such a word. Never, never, had she uncovered them for any reason but because it was usual. They were pretty ; she had known that and been glad. She had been glad to be pretty, just as she had been glad to be healthy. Was there any harm in that ? Any harm such as her husband's

face had suggested? She felt herself shivering, and found her voice at last.

“ Tell Reynolds to bring me a wrap,” she said to the servant. “ I am cold.”

Edwards left the room, and, returning, lit the gas-stove and turned it up so high that a red glow overpowered the lamps. She watched it seeming to warm the silver embossing of the bowl before her and the green leaves of the flowers in it, checking an impulse to hide her eyes from the glare of it with her hands. Reynolds came with the wrap. It seemed absurdly appropriate that she should bring a black one. She half rose for Reynolds to throw the cloak over her shoulders, and noticed that her husband was watching her keenly until all the white and pink except her white face and little trembling hands were hidden inside the black drapery. Then his eyes fell. She rose to her feet.

“ I think I ’m not very well, Eustace. I shall have to ask you to excuse me. Send coffee upstairs to me, Edwards, and be sure it is very hot. It ’s cold to-night.”

She went to her room and sat there shivering, huddled up in her black wrap. Reynolds came with her coffee, asking if she should remain, and was curtly dismissed to her supper.

What did it all mean? Had she ever been immodest in her love? Ever? Had she ever dressed, even by

accident, as Ella did, or acted after the manner of some others she had seen, or heard of? If so, surely Eustace, who loved her, should have known it had been by accident. Some people, she knew, objected to evening dress — common, middle-class people—people who go to the theatre in a high bodice with a bunch of flowers pinned somewhere about them. But the general feeling of all the nice people she knew was to take evening dress as a matter of course. She had dressed to look nice at parties, so that she might be asked to dance often, and not be a failure and a discredit and anxiety to good-natured Mrs. Bailey, who took her about. Oh, yes—she had been very anxious to look nice. She had always shown herself to her mother, and sometimes to Dick, to make sure she did. And she would have been disappointed if they had not been satisfied with her appearance ; but that was only because she knew that the nicer she looked the pleasanter her evening would be. Things were like that. There was no harm in it.

She tried unconsciously to convict herself of some fault, so as to make it easier to forgive Eustace ; but it was no use. She had never consciously been immodest. Still Eustace was tired and cross to-night, and looked very ill indeed. Nothing that he said ought to count. He had pleaded that with her once when he had been ill before. She was making an absurd fuss about a trifle. She rose and began to laugh, and, going to the

glass to take down her hair, saw her pretty frock reflected before her, and approved of it. She called herself a few hard names for being silly, and crept into bed laughing.

But presently the laughter began to change into sobs. There was evil in the world. She had known it always, and been reminded often ; only, somehow, she could not keep on remembering it ; it had a way of slipping out of her mind, so that she spoke and acted without considering it at all. There were coarse things, and coarse people — hateful-minded girls, and hateful-minded wives, even — and Eustace had confounded her with these. Very possibly it was her own fault. She tried hard to see how, but she could not. That proved nothing ; people never can see when they are in the wrong themselves. He had not known what it was that excited her, why she had wanted him to be specially loving and gentle. She could not remember what she had said, but somehow she had given a wrong impression. She had been like a stupid, chattering child, saying the wrong thing. A wife ought n't to be a stupid child. There must be no more of it. This beautiful knowledge she still held secret must be shared with him. He would be as happy as she when she had spoken. She would tell him directly he came upstairs, and he would be sorry that he had been so unkind.

He seemed a very long while coming. She began to feel worn out with crying and waiting. It was silly to

cry so much. Well,—and a little bitterness mingled with her desire for peace for half a second,—well, at any rate, she must be so ugly now that she could offend no one. She put her hand to her eyes to feel how swollen and inflamed they were, listening still for her husband's step on the stair.

When at last she heard it, it stopped at the door of her boudoir. He seemed to be going in — yes — she heard the door creak as he opened it.

That was good. He was thinking of her; perhaps he was sorry already, and was looking for her to tell her so. He was coming up now to his own dressing-room. She lay and waited. Now she had stopped being miserable. It began to be very hard to keep awake ; but, of course, she must not go to sleep until she and her husband had spoken together.

The lamp was out. She must have been asleep after all. She stretched out her hand ; her husband was not with her. There was no smell of smoke in the room, so the lamp must have burnt out some time ago. She listened. She could not hear him moving in the next room, but she could hear every now and then a low murmur as if he were talking to himself — and yet not talking exactly : murmuring, moaning almost. What was the matter? Had he fallen and hurt himself? Was he ill? Surely, in either case, he would have called to her. She raised herself, listening still more intently, and feeling quite absurdly frightened and

unnerved. A clock somewhere struck two, and she started. It had been quite early when her husband had come upstairs. Perhaps he had fallen asleep, still angry with her, and because he was angry was as miserable as she. That was why he moaned and muttered in his sleep.

She must go and put things right at once, and beg him to think more nobly of his wife, now she was his child's mother.

She opened the door softly. There was a little moonlight in the next room, and she could see her husband. He was resting against the low window-ledge, with his head bent towards it. He was not moaning, but speaking with rapid monotony words of which she did not catch the meaning. Praying? She loved him for it. She had been praying to-day. He did not hear her enter. She crossed the room and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Eustace, what is the matter? are you ill, or worried? Come and listen to me. I want to tell you something that will please you very much."

He turned, trying to draw his shoulder from her touch. The moment she saw his face, she knew it was not illness nor any ordinary trouble that had kept him away from her. She would not loose her hold.

"Eustace, Eustace, dear, don't let anything spoil our love for each other! We must love each other more than ever. Don't look at me like that, dear—

love me ! There 's a reason — it is something beautiful."

" Beautiful !— love you — " He had caught but the two words. His eyes frightened her : he seemed mad —and she could not tell if it was with love or hate. Next instant, with a furious movement of his hand, he thrust her from him, speaking two words only.

The one was " Go," and the other ? She had heard it before in church. Christ was the only one who ever spoke it kindly. No woman can hear it without a scorching sense of shame in her heart. She drew back with a cry. Something hard in her husband's hand had struck her on the breast when he pushed her from him. But the word hurt most ; it was the word that had made her cry out.

She crept back to her bed, hiding her face from the very darkness.





CHAPTER XXI

FACING THE BLAST

WHEN Annie woke next morning it was to the consciousness that she was very unhappy, and to that dull feeling that follows a miserable night : as if she not only always would be, but always had been, miserable. Everything pleasant in the past was blotted out by last night's trouble, and of course after it there could be no future.

Reynolds stood beside her bed with a breakfast tray. Reynolds was a pretty, fresh, black-and-white girl, whose caps always seemed fresher and whiter in the morning than any other servant's caps. Being unusually tactful, she looked at the worn, haggard little face of her mistress as placidly as if she saw nothing amiss there, and made no stupid excuses of "I'm afraid you've had a bad night, ma'am."

Presently, when Annie had drunk her tea, she said that her mistress had been sleeping so heavily that she thought it better not to wake her, since the master had breakfasted early and gone out.

Annie felt intensely relieved. At least, she would not have to see Eustace while she was still weak and worn out. She would have time to collect herself and be reasonable, and not make matters worse by saying the wrong thing. Of course Reynolds knew there was trouble of some sort; servants always knew when things went wrong in a house. They would all be sorry for her; but they were nice, well-trained servants, and would n't show it.

She told Reynolds that she was tired, and would not get up until luncheon. And as the maid left she laughed at herself a little bitterly.

How she had always despised people who went to bed because they were miserable! And yet it was quite the wisest thing to do. What everybody does generally turns out to be the right thing when one understands it. One can hide in bed until one's face tells no tales, and until one has thought out what to do. Even if Eustace were to come in, Reynolds would tell him she was asleep and must not be disturbed, whereas if she went downstairs she might have to see him.

After a long sleep and a careful toilet and luncheon, Annie was more herself again. Last night's trouble loosed its grip on her heart, and only stood in the background threatening. To escape it, she would go to the Baileys'. There were a lot of girls staying in the house, most likely, for there had been a dance somewhere the

night before. She would go and gossip and be light-hearted and silly and irresponsible with them. She would go early and catch them in the lounging-hour between luncheon and afternoon engagements.

She was shown into the drawing-room, which was empty. The servant said she was not quite sure whether anyone was at home, but would inquire. Annie knew what that meant quite well. Mrs. Bailey was asleep, and the girls were all lying about upstairs with their hair down and their shoes off. In the old days she would have run straight upstairs as a matter of course. Now she was treated as "a visitor." She rebelled, and running upstairs unannounced, hammered at the bedroom door.

"Let me in, girls: I've come for a holiday."

There was a confused babble of welcome, and the door was opened. It was all just as she expected. The room seemed a chaos of pretty faces and loose hair and frilled petticoats, and neat feet displayed on chairs or on the foot of the bed.

A tall girl was looking disconsolately at a pair of yellow satin shoes on her knees; she was nursing them with much show of affection.

"I shall never be able to wear them again," she said. "I've danced myself permanently into the next size."

"You should have worn the next size to start with," said Beatrice. "The difference between threes and

fours looks a good deal in the shops, but it 's never noticed when one wears them ; but everyone notices the difference between a tight-shoed walk and a natural one."

" George told her that," said Effie. " Fancy being engaged to a man who talks to you for your good ! One might as well marry a widower, or a man with a beard, at once."

" Did the curate talk to you for your good ? " asked the dull girl of last year, who had now so far got over her shyness as to be habitually tiresome.

" The curate " was still a painful subject, for he had consoled himself very rapidly indeed for Effie's desertion, and nothing hurts a girl's feelings much more than that.

The tall girl came to the rescue. She was a nice, soothing girl with a pleasant voice.

" I think it 's so nice of some girls to marry curates, because then other girls don't have to ! "

" No one has to," said Beatrice.

" Oh, yes, they have—if it 's a curate or no one. And don't you see, if a girl marries a curate, she leaves another man free."

" Not if it 's a curate or no one," said Effie. " And it mostly is among the sort of people who marry curates. That is why it is so horrid to be beastly middle class, as we are. Common women are all right. No one poaches among their men. But smart people, when they 've

got a daughter too stupid, or too plain, or too old to marry in her own set, swoop down and snatch up one of our middle-class men for her. Like Lady Mary and Mr. Calne, you know. Now we can't do that. The difference between an earl and a barrister with relations in the peerage does n't matter much. But the difference between the barrister and a 'busman can't be ignored. That 's why all the old maids are in the middle class. They can't marry the 'busmen, and the barristers have been snatched up for peerage failures."

"You have thought such a great deal about marriage," said Annie, doubtfully.

"Whatever else was there to think about," cried Effie, "when I 'd left school and was n't used to having nothing to do? You don't suppose I want to be married really, do you? But I know that the sooner I do the more of a success I am. What we would all of us really like would be to never think of it, but just go on having a good time, till we met someone we could n't help liking tremendously. As you did, you know. Only everyone is n't lucky enough to have that come so soon. Of course, if one were sure it would come some time, one would wait ; but one is not sure, and while one is waiting dreadful things happen to one's complexion."

"Ella waited a good long time, and it came," said Dolly, the shy girl of last year, who had developed into gentle optimism.

"Yes, just when she had begun to get anxious about her complexion," said her sister.

"That 's such a susceptible time," said Effie. "It answers to baldness in a man. Have you noticed that when a man begins to be bald he always grows a little sentimental?"

"But you are wrong about Ella, Effie," the tall girl said. "She 's not in the least in love with Mr. Archer. She only thought he would do pretty well when she found the Hoxton young man would n't. She makes him go to the dances with her, and dances with him a great many times, but she used to sit out with Mark Scarsdale."

"Mark Scarsdale dances very badly," said Annie, quickly.

"That would account for her sitting out with Mark Scarsdale, but not for her not sitting out with Mr. Archer," said the tall girl.

There was a little pause. Effie broke it, of course.

"To go back to what we were saying just now, about girls wanting to be married."

"If we did n't, men could n't be," the tall girl interrupted. "And where should we all be then?"

"There 's really nothing else for us middle-class girls to do," continued Effie. "It 's our victory, our M.A. degree, our biggest score at cricket. It is n't the stupid man we care about: it 's scoring off the other girls. It would be different if one had something else

to do, but one has n't. In the country it's quite exciting. When there is only one man among fifteen girls, of course they run after him ; so they would if he were a blue china vase. Of course they all run after him, all run—and 'but one receiveth the crown,' as St. Paul says. It's the success we want, not the man ; only the man does n't know it."

"That's what's so funny about men," said the tall girl. "If one of us happens to be one among many men, we know we are fussed and flattered just because we are the only one. Men never do. They take all the fuss seriously. That's why their heads get turned. We can stand much more of flattery than men, because we believe it much less."

"But they do believe it ; that's what's so funny," said Effie. "They believe the nonsense they say to us, and we know quite well it's nonsense. We don't believe the things we say to please them, and they accept them solemnly as truths. Now, why is that?"

"I'm afraid it's because we are wiser than they are," said Beatrice, gloomily. "I did n't want to believe that ; it's so unsettling ; but one has to when one grows older. We talk very foolishly when we're young, but we have to be wiser than they are in the end."

"That's why we don't marry models, and waiters, and landladies' sons, and things, as they do, I suppose," said the tall girl.

“ I wonder if that *is* the reason why we don't ? ” said the shy girl.

At this moment Mrs. Bailey entered, and exclaimed, on seeing Annie :

“ You here, my dear, with all these chattering girls? Come downstairs with me, and we will have our tea in quiet.”

Annie rose with a feeling of relief. She was almost the youngest present, and yet she was not one of the girls any more. She felt a foreigner among them. Formerly she could have talked with the girls more easily than with Mrs. Bailey. All their talk had been of marriage. They had owned there was really nothing else to talk about. It was everything to them,—their whole career. And though their talk had not been unintelligent, it had been entirely ignorant. No man, not even the best, can realize the completeness of even a vulgar and silly girl's ignorance. She may know mere words, but they mean nothing to her ; so she lays herself open to blame. Annie understood now why Eustace disliked the Baileys. Formerly she had not known — when she, too, was a girl ; she was not a girl any more. Marriage had made a great gulf between them and her, just as marriage had bridged over the difference of years between her and their mother. She dropped into an easy-chair in the drawing-room and talked about nice, dull, unemotional, household matters. Presently the elder woman's experience guessed

at her secret, and she spoke kindly and cheerfully about it, and congratulated her, and petted her, and made much of her.

“ When do you expect Eustace back ? ” she asked, presently.

“ Oh, he is back. He came back last night.”

“ He is very pleased, of course ? ”

“ He does n't know yet.”

And suddenly the knowledge of why he did not know came back to her. Why he did not know, and why she had been glad to miss him this morning. She was ashamed, and terribly ashamed of her shame. She had not felt it as she stood before the crucifix, nor before the pure face of the white Venus. No, nor even when Dick had looked in her eyes and been sorry for her. Nor yet among the chatter of the girls upstairs. But the moment she thought of Eustace, the sense of shame returned.

“ Oh, my dear ! ” Mrs. Bailey was saying. “ You ought to have told him.”

She made an effort, and laughed pleasantly.

“ He was very tired and hungry after his journey. I am going to tell him this evening.”

“ How pleased your mother would have been ! ” said Mrs. Bailey.

And then the longing for the old life and the old thoughts grew insupportable. The sound of laughter, as the girls trooped downstairs into the hall, hurt

terribly. Mrs. Bailey patted her shoulder with pleasant elderly misconception as she went out to her carriage.

“There, there, my dear ; we all miss our mothers when this time comes to us. But you were always a good daughter. You have nothing to reproach yourself with. That ought to be a comfort to you.”

It was very small comfort. If she had not been a good daughter, her mother would have forgiven her by now—comforted by the sweetness of death for every little wound she had ever suffered. But she was ashamed of God's good gift, of nature's kindest triumph, and there was no comfort for that.

In marrying Eustace she had braved a certain amount of reprobation. She had not known this at the time, because, in her simple, narrow-minded, good little mother's view, anyone who left the Romish Church, from any cause whatsoever, was a brand snatched from the burning. She ought to have known what she was doing. She had been twenty-two. But then it is not much use being twenty-two if, in the years between that age and seventeen, one has learned nothing of life or the other people in the world. She did not admit for a moment that if she had been wiser, she would not have married Eustace. She had believed, and still believed, that he was as free to marry as any other man. But she saw that if she had been less ignorant, she would have known better how to deal with him.

He had asked her once, in the early days of this married life, whether, if she had had to choose between him and all the rest of the world, she would have chosen him. And she had answered that she had chosen him in marrying him. It was truer than she had known at the time. He and she were, in a measure, outcasts. Only the people who "did not care" would tolerate what they had done. Even Dick was marrying a woman who would not know her.

But all this did not matter so long as her husband did not fail her. But if he came to think her an outcast too— It must not be. She must not let him fail her. There must be no quarrelling, no reproaches—she could not afford them. She must be gentle and patient, tell him what was in store for them both, and ask to be held in some honor as a wife and mother.

She leaned back wearily in her seat, almost too tired to feel at all. Clenching her hands against her breast, she was dimly conscious of some physical pain there, and, slipping her hand inside her frock, noticed a long purple bruise. It was where her husband had struck her last night.





CHAPTER XXII

AN EMISSARY OF EVIL

WHEN Annie reached home she was met with the news that a visitor awaited her—a Mr. Carlisle. He had come immediately after she left, and waited all through the afternoon. She knew the name, and went straight into the room where he waited.

Annie had always considered that her husband and Dick were the two best-looking men she had ever met ; but this visitor surpassed them both. He was more than good looking. He was intensely beautiful, with a beauty so exalted and spiritualized that it was almost painful to look upon. It was a face that had possibly been frankly and happily animal at the first ; but everything animal, everything human almost, had been, so to speak, disciplined and prayed out of it. It was like that wonderful bust of the monk dug up in some garden at Rome. A face that reminded one irresistibly of the prayer of Saint Augustine, in which, remembering his many penances with regret, he had

prayed that he might be forgiven for cruelty done to a man, even though the man was himself. It was impossible not to know that such a man had come on a painful errand, and had come willingly because it was painful.

"You have been waiting a long time, they tell me," she said.

"I was here to wait till you should come."

"You have called to see my husband, perhaps—he—" she stopped, faltering—she knew that was not so—that he had come to see her. She knew what he had come to tell her. She had been blind all this while, but now the blindness was lost in a sudden horrible keenness of vision. She remembered how Eustace had called the happy death of her good mother a "coincidence," and meant that it was a judgment—his protest against the Venus in her room, the flowers before the crucifix, his intermittent, capricious fasting, everything down to the horrible events of last night. She stood staring at the messenger of evil, afraid to speak.

"You expected it, then?" he said.

"You have brought me some message from my husband?"

She heard her own voice distinctly, as if it did not belong to her. A look of pity rose in the priest's face, but did not lessen its austerity, or make it more human.

"You must prepare yourself for very great pain."

"Speak, please!"

"You were aware from the first that Eustace Stravil was not free to marry?"

"I say he was free!"

She spoke passionately — almost in a cry. The priest bowed and stood silent. He was not there to argue.

"Go on," she said, growing quiet again. "Don't question me. Tell me what you have to say."

"Eustace Stravil has repented of his apostacy. He is at present on his way to a religious house abroad, which he will enter finally, at the proper time."

She had known it quite well from the moment she had seen the face of the messenger. Again she heard her voice, unnaturally quiet and steady, as she answered.

"And he told me he had given you up," she said.

The man's face glowed with spiritual tenderness.

"But I had not given him up," he said. "I fought for him against himself."

She gave a little cry, and, turning away, walked across the room and back, struggling with hopelessly convincing memories of her husband's words and manner. Trifles — trifles all; but they might have taught her what it was that she had been fearing, half unconsciously, all this time, if she had not been blind. She turned abruptly.

"How long has this been going on?"

His face lit with splendid enthusiasm.

"By the grace of God, ever since his so-called marriage," he said. "From the very beginning of his temptation and fall the grace of God was working in him to this end."

"You mean you were working," she said. "This is your doing. From the first day you found my husband again, and began to influence him, he grew bitter and contemptuous of me. You have made him do this."

"Madam," and he spoke with the genuine regret of a just man who puts away praise he has no right to accept; "Madam, I wish from my heart that I need not deny what you say; but it was not so."

"How then?"

"Think again."

She thought again of his attitude on her mother's death, and towards the crucifix, the impression that the story of the twelve crowns created, the impulse to observe fast days. She understood what had happened, and when it had been happening, but not why.

"You understand?" The austere face was one flame of unselfish enthusiasm. It frightened her.

"No, I don't understand at all."

"It was yourself! I may have helped. I tried my best; but it was you — your purity, your belief — mistaken belief, but sincere — your blind testimony to the truth in which he had lost faith. Oh, madam, God

has been good to you ! If you were the cause of this man's sin, you have been God's instrument in bringing him back to the grace he had lost."

" I can't believe it ! " she cried. " It is too horrible, too unjust ! God would not do such a cruel thing — not to save ten men's souls."

" My child," said the priest, " some day you will understand that if God broke ten thousand mortal hearts to save one immortal soul, the loss were as nothing counted against the gain. The man you called your husband—no, I will say the man you truly believe to be your husband—has found this truth at last."

" Why did n't he tell me sooner ? " she cried.

" Was not his part hard enough ? "

" I would not have tried to keep him if he wanted to go."

The priest smiled a little, as if he neither believed her nor felt any surprise she should say what was not true.

" Then will you not rejoice that he has gone ? " he said.

" No. It was wrong and wicked of him. No one ever pleased God by breaking promises."

" His first promise was to God."

" God never asked for that promise. There is n't a word in the Bible, from beginning to end, forbidding priests to marry, or I would n't have married him."

Again the priest bowed, refusing to argue. He was right. What good would it do her to prove her case twenty times over to him, even if it were possible to prove it at all?

“But, why did he come back?” she cried. “Why did he come back to me last night?”

“That was wrong. It was cruel to you, and a danger to himself. I tried to dissuade him from it. He said he could never be sure of himself if he did not. It was his Gethsemane. I was praying for him all the while.”

“Did you think of me at all? Did n't God think of me?”

“My child, I did not forget. I prayed that you might be consoled in your trouble. And God will not forget his chosen instrument.”

“I had been praying, too,” she said. “I had been thanking God all day for my child that was coming.”

The words were said involuntarily, and half to herself. She did not know that the priest was thrown a little off his guard by them. It was something he had not reckoned with.

“Did he know this?” he asked.

“No. I went to tell him, but he struck me, and pushed me from him. I don't know if you will tell him —” She stopped short, catching her breath and her face turning scarlet with the memory of last night. If she had been watching the priest, she would have

known by the involuntary compression of his lips at the question that he would not tell Stravil of this. "But if you do," she continued, "tell him it was only to let him know that I had come. Because I thought it such a beautiful and sacred thing. Love has never been quite the same for him as for me. I always thought love quite a good thing. But I must see him and tell him this myself. Where is he?"

"I must not tell you that. I gave him my word I would not. It rests with him to do so."

"Will he tell me?"

"You will certainly have word from him."

"But will he tell me where he is?"

"I must answer you frankly," said the priest. "I hope not. For the present it will be better if he does not."

"But you know. He has sent you here to break it to me. Perhaps he told you to be gentle — well — you have been gentle in your way ; but tell me the truth."

He looked at her with the same abstract and exalted pity that he had shown before, and answered her outright.

"If God gives him grace to hold his present purpose, you will never see him again."

There was a pause — a long pause. Then the priest resumed :

"Business communications can be made through Mr. Stravil's solicitors. They have moved, I understand.

The address is — ” he hesitated ; he had forgotten, and looked at a slip of paper in his hand.

She held out her hand without speaking. He bowed and gave it to her. It was in Eustace’s hand, and contained nothing but the new address of the solicitors. It seemed the visible confirmation of all the priest had told her — that Eustace had written this for her with no word of farewell. She folded the paper quietly and laid it on the mantelpiece.

“ Well, you have told me,” she said. “ You have done your work, and told me that it is done. Will you go now ? You said that some day I should come to thank God for this. I say, I hope some day you will come to ask God to forgive you your share in it.”





CHAPTER XXIII

FOR THE RIGHT

IT was some time before the truth as to Annie's position leaked out among her friends. But, of course, it was inevitable that it should become known sooner or later, and that it should be discussed as a topic of interest, and dropped as exhausted long before she knew that it was even suspected. Naturally, she received a good deal of pity, both of the sort that stings and the sort that merely irritates. There was a little laughter from some few who utterly disbelieved the story that Stravil had gone into a religious house of any kind. It had not been for religion, they said, that Stravil had neglected his wife during those frequent absences of his. Still most of those who knew the story were sorry, and would have said so had not the same good feeling that made them sorry prevented their obtruding their sympathy.

Ella heard the story from Mrs. Bailey, and Dick found her in a fury of indignation over it.

"It 's infamous!" she cried. "The man's a

renegade twice over. If he could n't be true to his church, he might, at least, be true to his wife."

"You see, he had come to agree with you, my dear, that she was not his wife," Dick answered. But the sarcasm fell unnoticed into the fire of Ella's indignation.

"The more reason to keep faith with her," she cried. "If he could n't be a priest, he might, at least, be a man. If I were a man, I hope I would n't give up my principles for a woman; but if I did, I'd hold to what I'd done. I would n't wriggle back into my principles again when I grew tired, and leave the woman in the lurch. What do men think of each other, Dick, when they think at all,—of such who do things like this? What do you think of a man like Stravil?"

"We don't idealize each other, as a rule."

"How does she bear it?"

"I can't tell you that. She does n't speak of it."

"She told you, of course."

"The bare facts."

"And you did n't tell me. Of course, I did n't deserve that you should, and I'm afraid you are one of the hard men who treat women as they deserve."

"My dear," — Dick felt the reproach and answered it — "it would have distressed you for nothing, considering how strong your views are in the matter. Mrs. Stravil took it very quietly, told me what had happened, and that she did n't want it talked about.

She mentioned you. She said, 'I suppose Ella will agree with what Eustace has done.' That was all I could have told you; but, as you see, I did not until you asked me."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No. She said she would write when she was ready for visitors again."

"And you allowed that? You let her shut herself up and brood? You did nothing?"

"There was nothing to do, except hold one's tongue."

"Oh, yes! That's your strong point, is n't it? You can do that well. Do you never do anything else? Dick, you don't live! You just stand about and let things happen."

"And sometimes," said Dick, "I'd just as soon they did n't happen."

Ella was nearly crying. She would have cried, only she was a woman who never repeated her effects, even natural effects. So she only stood with flushed face and shining eyes, and looked very beautiful indeed.

"Dick, I'm going at once to Annie to say I've been an idiot, and ask her to be friends again. I can't be any comfort to her in the matter: I sha'n't try. But I have a sharper tongue than she has, and I can help to keep off other people's curiosity until that weak creature comes to his senses again. He will. He'll veer between his soul and his passions all his life, now he's

once begun, and she 'll be sacrificed to each in turn. I must go to her. If she does n't want me for a friend now, at least, she shall have the satisfaction of telling me so. That man has made me so ashamed that I can't let the thing stand at my refusing to know her a moment longer. It 's absurd."

"It 's been absurd all along," said Dick. "You remember I said so."

Somehow the words sounded more affectionate than any he had yet spoken to her. They seemed to separate her so far from her faults. She was too tall ever to look up to a man effectively, but there was a certain expression of deference possible to her that took off at least six inches from her height.

"Do you think she 'll make it up? Suppose you tell her how sorry I am, and that I 'm really much more in earnest in being sorry than I was about being idiotic."

"Say that yourself," said Dick. "Show her the same side of yourself as you have just shown me, and I 'm quite sure she will be glad to be friends again."

"Let 's go now, then," said Ella.

"If you like, I 'll take you across the park to Sloane Street, and leave you there."

"You won't come in with me?"

"No. I 'll take you there and call for you in about an hour."

"But suppose Annie won't see me?"

Dick laughed. "I'll wait while you hear if she's at home. She won't turn you out; it's raining, you know; and she is not at all a dramatic person. There won't even be a scene of reconciliation. When I come back I shall find you chatting quite easily to each other about things that don't matter. I'm glad you've changed your mind, you know. I have been rather ashamed of myself that I took your attitude towards her so patiently——"

"And I've been very much irritated that you did," said Ella, frankly. "I really don't think you ought to have let me be so ridiculous, you know."

"Have you forgotten what you said about it?" said Dick, smiling.

"I did n't know this was going to happen then," said Ella; "nor—nor I did n't know you were quite nice, Dick." She stopped, half expecting a pretty answer, but Dick did not make it.

"Well, after all, it is better for you to retract of your own choice than to please me," he said. "Shall we start now?"

Archer's prophecy proved correct. Annie received her old friend for all the world as if there had been no difference of opinion between them. She indicated acceptance of implied amends, perhaps, by special emphasis in her kiss and hand-grasp, but that was all; and they sat and talked of everything and everyone under the sun, except Eustace Stravil and his desertion.

Before very long Annie asked if Ella would be godmother to the child when it came, and Ella agreed, and showed frankly how much the suggestion pleased her. She thought Annie was asking what she had a right to ask, a public withdrawal, so to speak, of all she had said against the marriage, and she was pleased to have an opportunity of showing her change of front in so dignified and so effective a manner.

“ I want to ask Dick to be godfather,” Annie said.

“ But, of course, not until afterwards.”

“ I ’m afraid Dick is a very strange person for the office,” Ella said, hesitatingly. “ But, of course, if I am godmother, he ought to be godfather. At any rate, we can join in one present, so that I shall be saved from giving something that would seem shabby in comparison with my colleague, and discrediting my office. Did you know poor Mab had muffed her music exam. ? ”

“ Oh, what a pity ! ” said Annie. “ How did that happen ? I thought you all expected her to do great things in music.”

“ It seems she had n’t a grain of music in her,” said Ella ; “ only flexible fingers and any amount of perseverance. Dick has bought her a typewriter. She learned to play that in a week, and she is making more out of it than she ever would have done out of sonatas. She has no ear. I suppose I should have found that out if I had had any ear myself. Certainly I did always

think her scales worse to listen to than anyone else's, but I thought that was only because she was my sister."

Annie laughed, and when Dick returned he found them both laughing. He was asked to stay to dinner, and stayed. The three passed many pleasant evenings together after that. Annie began to go about as usual, ignoring gossip until it began to ignore her, and ceased to interest herself in her husband's absence, or the cause of it. Presently London emptied for the summer. Annie gave up going out or receiving formally. They three still had pleasant, quiet evenings together. Ella enjoyed them immensely. She told the Baileys, with quite a sober air, that she was learning how much enjoyment there was in quiet pleasures, and that she preferred lounging in Annie's little room while Dick played unobtrusively on the piano to going to the smartest of concerts, even when she had a new and thoroughly successful frock.

On this Beatrice had kissed her, and said, "Then you really love him now, dear," and Effie asked her with some acrimony whether she ever heard from Mark Scarsdale.

Ella was quite cross at the question, and encouraged Dick all the more to sit at the piano and play soft chords and sleepy melodies, while she and Annie gossiped in the firelight.

The musical evenings in Sloane Street stopped soon after that. Ella, who had been staying with Annie,

went home, and Mrs. Bailey took her place. Dick gathered that Annie's friends were a little anxious about her. Press of business kept him at the office a good deal just then ; and some friends of the Feltringhams coming from abroad brought messages for him, and in Lady Feltringham's name claimed his assistance in appreciating London ; so that Ella did not see very much of him for a time.

She called every day to inquire after Annie, and spent the rest of her time making gorgeous raiment for her trousseau out of rather more expensive materials than she had hitherto allowed herself.





CHAPTER XXIV

A KNIGHT'S VIGIL

AS soon as Mabel could "play her typewriter" correctly, Ella drew up an attractive advertisement for her.

"You must get a connection by advertising that you will do typewriting cheaper than anyone else," she said, "and then you can raise your charges." And when a bundle of illegible manuscript came in answer to the advertisement, Ella spent hours in helping her to decipher it.

"Shall you tell Dick I 've got work already?" asked Mab.

"I think not," Ella answered. "You see, he only gave you the typewriter to amuse you. But, of course, when I 'm married I sha'n't be able to make your frocks, so the sooner you start a fund for the purpose of helping yourselves the better."

"I don't care what the money 's for, so I can make sure of earning it," said Mab, sturdily.

"Well, you can, you see," said Ella. "But then Dick

does n't know how necessary it is for some of us to earn money ; or if he does, we need n't remind him."

" I don't believe he gave it to her just to amuse her," said Joan. " I believe it was to keep her from strumming on the piano when he 's here talking to you. The click of the typewriter is n't heard in the next room, but the piano is."

" I believe he gave it to her because he was so happy about Ella that he felt he must give something to somebody. Lovers are always like that," said Lucy, who was surreptitiously reading a penny novelette instead of her German grammar.

" And I *know* he gave it to me because he understood that since I 'm so ugly I want to be useful," said Mab. " And I 'm glad he 'll be my brother-in-law, so that I can be fond of him without being ridiculous. And I 'd like to tell him that I am useful ; but I won't if Ella would rather I did n't."

Ella was by no means sure which explanation of the gift was true. But she began to think a little impatiently of Dick. He should not leave her so much alone when she was anxious about her friend, almost the only person she really cared for. It was unkind ; and almost with this thought Dick came.

He suggested taking Ella and Mabel to a theatre, and was so pleasant and kind all the evening that Ella caught herself wishing over and over again that she was as satisfied with the engagement as he. He was

so nice that she would have liked not to have had one regret, and she had two — £800 a year was very little, and Dick was n't Mark Scarsdale. When they reached Westbourne Square after the play, the eldest of the other children were still up. They always were when Ella was not at home to send them to bed. Just now she was glad to see them, for their presence made her feel sufficiently chaperoned to ask Dick to come in and have some hot soup. And he and she sat talking and laughing over the play they had seen — with Mab, as usual, adoring Dick silently, and the other children waiting on them. After about half an hour Dick rose to go.

"I've kept you up a most unreasonable time," he said.

"I'm glad you came," said Ella. "I did n't want to be alone. We are all rather worried about Annie, you know."

"There's no special reason for anxiety, is there?" Dick asked.

"I don't know. Mrs. Bailey was crying when I met her to-day. But then Mrs. Bailey always seizes every available opportunity to cry."

"And the people who only cry once in a way are just as warm-hearted, are n't they?" said Dick, laying a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Good-night, dear," and he kissed her.

"Call a cab," said Ella. "It's a horrid night."

"No, I want to walk. Get in out of the cold. We don't want you ill too, you know. Good-night."

When Ella turned, Mab was standing in the hall. Ella bent and kissed her.

"What 's that for?" said Mab, pleased, but curious.

"Go to bed, you little wretch," said Ella, going upstairs herself. "What are you watching me for?"

"I know," said Lucy, who was, as usual, in the background. "It 's because Mr. Archer is so much nicer than 'Arry Balham. You did us all a good turn, after all, Mab, when you muffed your exam. 'Arry would n't have had anything to do with us; we 're so like his own people, he 'd have been ashamed of us."

But neither this reflection nor Ella's rare outburst of affection could raise Mab's spirits. She went upstairs holding one hand before her mouth. Unlike most people of strong emotions, it was harder for her to contain her feelings than to speak them. She held her mouth shut till Lucy, who followed her, was asleep; and then lay sobbing.

"He 'll never be my brother-in-law," she wept. "Never; he 'll die—I 'm quite sure. No one ever looked so good and so sad unless he was going to die. And Ella never noticed. She thought he was enjoying himself, and he was only pretending to enjoy himself to please us; and now he 's gone away to be miserable alone, and nobody knows or is sorry."

Some hours later, the doctor coming out from

Annie's doorway into the fog was startled by the sight of a man in evening dress leaning against the garden railings opposite him. The doctor instinctively crossed towards him, for people in evening dress don't lean against railings in the dead of night when they are quite themselves; and the young man's attitude did not suggest drunkenness. Before the doctor could get across the road the young man came forward and said quietly :

“ You have just come from No. 27 ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ How is she ? ”

“ Out of danger, I think.”

“ Thank you.” The young man raised his hat and was about to move on. Then he stopped. “ Was it — did she — ? ”

The doctor peered through his glasses into a white, quiet face — emotionless but for the eyes — and jumped to a conclusion.

“ Did she suffer, you would say? Yes, exceptionally. Upon my soul, I always come away from these cases wondering. Wondering how many of us men are worth what our mothers go through in bringing us into the world. When I hear some little ape, with no more manhood than serves to take him to the devil, sneering at women, I wish it were possible to put him to the pain these women bear as a matter of course, and see what would come of his superiority then.

Why, a man makes more fuss over the toothache than that brave little woman has made to-night. She was as calm as if she felt nothing. She would n't hear of chloroform. Every thought was for the child, nothing but the child."

"And not a thought that I ——?"

"That you cared, you would say. Had you any right to expect it?"

"No."

The young man turned away again, but the doctor's heart smote him. It was possible that the man outside had suffered as much as the woman within. His question had been a cry breaking through a self-constraint quite as terrible as hers.

"You must remember, if she had had such a thought, it would n't be to me that she would have spoken it," he said, and he laid a hand on the young man's shoulder to detain him.

"Go back to her," he went on. "I 'm taking a liberty ; but you began it, you see, by asking me questions. I don't know what you 've been up to, of course. That 's no business of mine. But I do know that she 's so happy with her boy that she 'd forgive anything, and probably get well twice as soon for doing it."

The doctor felt the young man's shoulder shrink from under his hand. Almost before his sentence was ended he found himself alone in the fog. He walked

on ; his house was only round the next corner. Presently he heard steps behind him, and waited. The young man was at his elbow.

“ I had better set you right,” he said. “ I am not Mr. Stravil. If I had left you under your mistake, you might have said something to them which would have led to disappointment.”

They were under a gas lamp, and the little circle of lurid light it made in the fog took in both figures. The doctor looked hard in the young man's face for a moment.

“ God help you !” he said, and walked on.

A policeman's lamp flashed in his face.

“ It 's all right, is n't it, sir ?” said the policeman, who knew the doctor. “ The young gentleman 's been round here most nights lately, and these Sherlock 'Olmes days one never knows who does n't want watching. But if you know him—— ”

“ He 's all right,” said the doctor, and he let himself in at his own door.





CHAPTER XXV

THE WISER WAY

ANNIE'S boy was an exceptionally satisfactory baby. He grew as he should, gave his nurses and the doctor no anxiety, and refrained from wails at his christening. Annie's case was more doubtful. It was some weeks before her friends gave up being anxious about her, and still longer before she could chatter comfortably with several of them at a time in her own drawing-room.

She got to this at last, however, one afternoon. Several people were in the room, and the baby was downstairs for inspection. Beatrice Bailey and one or two others were fussing over it and irritating the nurse. Lady Mary Calne and Mrs. East, Mrs. Bailey's married daughters, were at the tea-table, talking to Annie, when Dick was announced. Annie managed to convey an apology for the crowd in her greeting.

"The 'C. C. D.' Secretary and the baby," said one of the ladies; "how delightfully incongruous! This is the baby's first 'at home.' We have all come to

look at him. Now you are here, you will have to look at him too. There is nothing I enjoy so much as seeing a man look at a baby. He is so utterly in the dark as to what he ought to do with it."

"Oh, but I assure you, I shall do nothing with it," said Dick, seating himself at a safe distance. "My duties don't commence for ten years at least, I understand."

"Duties?" said the lady, and looked as though there must be a joke somewhere, and she would laugh directly she understood it. "Have people in government offices ever any duties?"

"Did n't you know Mr. Archer was godfather?" said Beatrice Bailey.

The lady imagined she had found her joke, and laughed.

"Oh, how funny," she said.

"Not at all," said Annie. "Mr. Archer undertook his duties in the spirit, not the letter. He is n't going to teach the boy the ten commandments and the catechism in the vulgar tongue. He's going to take him out to get his shoes wet, and his clothes in a mess, and things like that. A boy never grows up quite a gentleman if he has only his mother to look after him. And his godmother—Miss Payne is his godmother, you know—will spoil him just as much as I do. So Mr. Archer will always be at hand to work against our feminine influence."

Dick understood. This was a manifesto. People were to know that Stravil was never coming back, and were to ask no questions. He wondered whether Annie had heard further news lately. He looked at her keenly. She seemed older, he thought, and more resolute, and yet curiously like what she had been before her marriage. He saw that her friends had noted her speech, and were probably comparing it in their minds with her previous reticence.

"Let me look at the young man," he said. "He seems to know how to behave tolerably well already. I thought babies always cried when they were on exhibition."

Beatrice Bailey brought him across the room, followed by the anxious nurse.

"There!" she said; "is n't he a darling?"

"He's quite an average baby," said Annie. "I've seen uglier, and I've seen prettier. Now confess, Dick, you can't see any difference between this baby and the others."

"I've seen so few," said Dick, with a befitting air of helplessness. "I think this is rather prettier than the average, but it is a little like all the others."

"Just like — there's no difference whatever," and Annie laughed. Dick was so nice; he always understood just what he was wanted to say. "No difference in the world, except that this one is mine." She touched the little crumpled-up red hand, and colored

with pleasure as the fingers closed round her own. "Quite mine ; only I have deliberately given the calmest, least emotional man I know the right to interfere when I 'm silly, and spoil him. Take him away, nurse, before we make him cross. We want some more tea."

The other guests soon left. When the door had closed on the last of their adieux, Annie dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"I came directly I got your note," said Dick. "I had been out of town."

"Yes ; when I wrote I did n't know you were out of town, and if I 'd known you were back, I would have warned you not to come when all these people were here. I wanted to talk to you. I did n't know quite so many would come, or I would have asked Ella to come and help me through with it."

"You did very well."

"Do you think they understood ?"

"I fancy you told them as much as it concerns them to know."

"I wanted to tell you first. That was why I wrote to ask you to come. Can you dine to-night, or does Ella expect you ?"

"I can stay."

"Let 's go to my room until dinner-time ; it 's cosier there, and you can smoke. You go, while I tell them to bring the boy to me to be put to sleep while nurse

has her tea. You won't mind that, will you? He goes to sleep quite nicely."

Annie followed Dick to her boudoir, and seated herself in a low chair by the fire.

"That 's right : you 've got your cigarette," she said. "A cigarette, even someone else's, is such a help when one wants to say things one really feels !"

" You have heard something about Stravil ? "

" No, nothing, except what I heard at first through the lawyers about the money, and that he was never coming back, and would n't even see my letters if I wrote. That 's all settled. It 's something else I wanted to speak about."

" Take your time," said Dick.

" I 'm so glad Ella is friends with me again," Annie said, presently. " If she had not been, it would have been impossible for you and me to keep as we are. I think she knew that, and so she stopped disapproving directly I needed you very badly. Don't you think it was fine of her? I wish you would tell her what I think of it."

" Why not tell her yourself? "

" Oh, that 's the sort of thing one can't say to the people concerned. One feels so silly and uncomfortable ; one can only say it of them. Well, that 's the first thing I want to say. Ella has made it possible for you and me to be what we always have been. She will have you, and I shall have the boy, and we shall

all four be very happy. When you and she are married, it will be quite natural for my boy's godfather and godmother to help me with him, and keep me from spoiling him. So you see what you let yourself in for, Dick, when you agreed to stand."

"That 's all right," said Dick. "You and Ella both warned me, you know."

"But there is more than that," said Annie. "Something I can only talk about to you. You heard what I said just now about children who only have mothers?"

"Yes."

"You knew what I meant?"

"I thought you had had further news of Stravil. But you say you have not."

"No ; I am no surer than I was at the first that he would not come back. Only, I am resolved that he *shall not*."

There was a knock at the door, and the nurse entered with the child.

"He is very sleepy, ma'am," she said. "I could soon put him to sleep myself if you are tired."

"No, nurse," said Annie ; "bring him here. I want him."

The child was in his night-dress, though Dick failed to recognize any change in his toilet. Annie laid him across her knees and played with the little dimples and creases in his neck.

"I suppose it is only mothers who really think babies pretty," she said, a little wistfully.

"This one is pretty," said Dick.

"You have n't touched him yet."

Dick stroked the satiny cheek with one finger.

"I'll help you with him as much as you want when he is big enough," he said.

"You notice," said Annie, "how terribly like his father he is?"

Her face turned very white as she asked the question. Archer answered quickly :

"He has black eyes, and will have black eyebrows. I think that is all."

"You saw the likeness the first moment you saw him. That was why you would n't touch him. He is so like his father."

"That 's nonsense," said Dick. "Who 'd be so unjust to the poor little chap? Besides, I did n't dislike Stravil as much as that would imply. In fact, I did n't dislike him at all, and you 'll find presently that I am very fond of my godson, whether he has black eyes or not."

"That 's not all," said Annie. Her hand was lying lightly on the child's breast. For a moment she made a movement as if she would unfasten the little white robe, but changed her mind.

"I don't mean him to be like his father in anything," she said.

“ Will you tell me what you have on your mind, and get it over ? ” said Dick. “ Set the child down somewhere and tell me.”

Annie laughed a little.

“ He 'll have to stay on my knee till he goes to sleep. One can't lay a child down like a book or a work-basket, but I 'll talk quite quietly. I have been thinking about this day and night almost since he came. It 's not enough that Eustace says he will not come back. I must make sure that he cannot. Do you remember, Dick, how nice life was before he came into it ? There never seemed any harm in anything. You and I were never ashamed. Of course, he would have said that was because you were not in love with me.”

“ Go on,” said Dick. “ What are you trying to tell me ? ”

“ I find I can't say it, even to you. I 'm ashamed of having had such thoughts: they seem so wicked and foolish now.” She raised the child's tiny hand, and kissed the finger tips, smiling, but her face grew scarlet.

“ The one thing is, Eustace must not come back now the boy is here. When he left me — I daresay you all thought I was grieving because he left me. I should have been, perhaps, if it had n't been for the reason why he left me. In a little while, I began to fear his coming back, instead of wanting it. Whenever I thought of the boy, I was dreadfully afraid. My

son shall not be a priest. He shall not look at life through a priest's eyes. Do you know that picture of Saint Monica and her son, the priest? I always hated it. I can't think how any woman could want her son to be a priest. It is like rebuking God for having given her a son, if in atonement for it she is to have no son. It is shaming the motherhood God gave her. I know quite well what Eustace would want. But I won't have it. My son is to be just like other boys; strong and happy, and a man. And he must marry, and love his wife, and be glad he loves her, not ashamed. I'd rather he died now than lived to think about me and his own wife as his father thinks. You remember I asked you once if you would bring me a wicked book to see if I liked it? Eustace had been speaking to me, and I remembered things that he believed. It was that day I came out of church, you know. The world had begun to be horrible. I wanted to know for certain if it was horrible, too. That day on the river put things quite right for a long time, and then Eustace— Oh, I can't say it! You love Ella, you know. Well, love is a good thing, is n't it? It is n't what Eustace thinks it—what he made me think it."

"It is a good thing. Almost the only good thing. I don't think you need say any more, dear. I understand you."

"Then you understand that he must not come back. The world began to grow clean again directly he left me.

I began to be glad the boy was coming, as I was at first. Before he came, I only thought of hushing things up and avoiding scandal. Now, I want to know how I can be free."

"Free?"

Dick repeated the word as a question, surprised.

"Quite free, you know," she said, quietly.

"It's a horrible thing to face," said Dick.

He did n't mention the word. They both understood it.

"Could I do that?"

"I don't know." He remembered those rumors doubtfully, quite certain that Annie did not mean to search the gutters for evidence against her husband.

"In any case, not for some time, you know."

"But there's an easier way now. I could bring an action to make him come back, and when he did not, I could be free. There was a case like that in the papers the very day I first began to be afraid. That put it into my mind."

"You don't know what you are talking of," said Dick.

"Yes, I think I do. Horrible publicity—dreadful things said about me—my name in the papers. It would be terrible. That woman in the papers did it for her son's sake. I can do it for mine."

"Are you quite sure?" Dick spoke with an effort, but he spoke firmly. "Are you quite sure that you

are just to Stravil? You are a quiet woman. He's an emotional, almost an hysterical man. If he has done a thing he may regret, won't you give him a chance to undo it?"

"If there was only me," said Annie, "I would."

"And are you quite sure that you won't regret this if you do it? One does n't lose love so easily. Would you feel so bitter against him if you did not love him?"

"If I love him, that's sin," she said. "He says so. The more I love him, the worse he thinks me. If I loved him more than I did the day I married him, that would be the chief reason why he should not come back."

"But, dear—think. To go into court, answer cross-examinations, to put yourself in a position that——"

"I know," interrupted Annie. "I know quite well. It will be like going into the midst of a fever hospital. But I shall not die of it. I can come out, and bathe and disinfect myself, and forget all about it. That will be better, I think, than letting my son grow up to manhood in poisoned air."





CHAPTER XXVI

RELEASED

SOME little time later Ella, on a shopping expedition, found herself at Regent's Circus. That was by no means unusual. She generally shopped in that neighborhood. If one chooses discreetly, one can shop as well at a big cheap Holborn warehouse as in Bond Street. One pays more at the latter place for the convenience of having the best things selected, and one's choice made easier. But Ella could better afford to dispense with skilled assistance than to pay highly. So the extremes of the shopping districts were familiar to her. No familiarity, however, would make the crossings easy to Ella ; so she hesitated, skirts in hand, as she generally did, and looked long into the shops, waiting for that mythical " lull in the traffic " which optimists and people from the country believe in so firmly.

There seemed no special reason why she should remember that day when she had parted from Mark Scarsdale at this very crossing, but she did think of

him while she waited. Then she set her teeth firmly, grasped her skirt, and stepped off the pavement. At that moment she felt a firm hand on her arm, and, turning her face, saw Mark beside her. He looked thinner and browner. She noticed that change, but no other. He was the same man, so far as she was concerned.

"I've been watching you for the last five minutes," he said. "If I had n't been here, you'd never have got across. What you've done all the time I've been away, I don't know."

She only said "Ah!" under her breath. Talking on a crossing was out of the question. Besides, she needed a little time to consider how she had best describe her doings while he had been away. She did n't get it, however, for the moment they were safe on the opposite pavement, Mark spoke:

"I have n't got fifty thousand pounds a year, but I've got five. Will that do?"

"One would have done," said Ella.

She said it without thinking, without caring if it was the right thing to say, or considering what effect it would have on him, or how she looked when she said it. She said it because it was true. For the first time in her life she had "let herself go." The sensation was delicious.

"Oh," said Mark. "Then we're engaged, are n't we?"

She reined in her emotions, but they still showed unmanageable in her face.

“ Oh, no—not yet ; but we will be.”

“ What 's the matter ? ”

“ You must ask me again, presently. I shall say yes ; but you must not ask me yet. Don't be angry with me, Mark. You see: you have n't much right, for you never thought very well of me. But, such as I am, when you ask me I shall say yes.”

“ How soon may I ask you ? ”

“ Oh, perhaps in three quarters of an hour — And just now — well, you 'd better call a cab, I think.”

“ Where to ? ” he asked, as he handed her in.

“ Whitehall.”

“ Is it a Government affair ? ” he asked.

She did n't answer. He got in beside her.

“ Shall I tell you what I 've been doing now, or wait till we are engaged ? ” he said.

“ You may as well begin now.”

“ You would like to hear about the money first, of course.”

She looked at him quickly; but he had spoken quite simply and naturally, without any trace of reproach or sarcasm.

“ You found diamonds, I suppose ? ”

“ No. I did n't.”

“ Oh ; I thought you had come back with your pockets full of diamonds.”

"Would you have liked that? It will be cheaper to buy them in London, ready set."

"But how did you get so rich, if you did n't find diamonds?"

"I found a white Caffir."

"What in the world is that?"

"Well, this one was a misanthrope. He had run away from civilization twenty years ago because of a girl."

"A girl who would n't have him?"

"A girl who would n't have him because he was poor."

"Poor girl!" said Ella; "she was miserable, I expect."

"Oh, no; *she* married someone else," said Scarsdale.

But, considering how near she had been doing the same thing herself, neither the tone of contempt for the other girl, nor the look of happy proprietorship turned on herself, gave Ella the gratification one has a right to expect from an intense compliment.

"Well: we were going north," continued Scarsdale, "a little set of us—all broke, you know, as I was. We were n't looking for diamonds, but gold. One of us had got it into his head that there was gold to be had in Quis, and we were going to look for it, and on the way we found a white Caffir. He'd lived for twenty years without seeing a white face, and the poor chap was dying, and he had an idea that he wanted to go

home and die on his farm. He 'd let his farm on a twenty years' lease, and the twenty years were up, and he 'd got some sort of an idea that if he went home to the farm he 'd find the girl there. He was off his head, you know, and the blacks were all afraid, and would n't take him any farther."

"Yes," said Ella.

"I could n't stand it, you know—the way he talked about that girl. She could n't have been good for much ; but of course he thought her perfect still. When he was n't off his head—he used to get quiet in the evenings—he told me all about her. We got very chummy."

"And you told him about me?"

"Not quite all."

"I see. Only the best of me."

"Then he wanted me to leave him, and go with the rest after the gold, and get rich, and go back to you."

"And you?"

"I said I 'd be—somethinged if I would. I was going to take him back to his farm. Anyone would, you know. You must n't mind. It was only putting off coming back to you for a little while."

"Of course I don't mind. Go on."

"We never got to his farm. We did our best; but he had n't strength for it. We struck a missionary station a couple of days before he died. He was quite himself at the last, and insisted on making his will,

He left me the farm. When we 'd seen the last of the poor old chap, I was in two minds about going straight back to Quis gold hunting; but the missionaries persuaded me to find out first if the farm was worth anything. So I went south, and I found what had been a farm twenty years ago was the very middle of a town, with two big hotels and half the market-place on it. I had a little trouble in proving my claims, but I did prove them. And that 's all."

It was to Ella's credit that, though her chief thought was, what a blessing the missionaries were there to witness the will, she kept it to herself, and blushed over it. The cab stopped at Whitehall Buildings.

" Shall I wait ? " asked Scarsdale cheerfully.

" Oh, no! that would be dreadful. It 's bad enough as it is. Go to Westbourne Terrace. No, don't—I must see my people before you do. Drive to the Marble Arch, and wait inside the park at the first seat till I come. I 'll be as quick as I can."

" I 'm afraid you 've not been behaving at all well," said Scarsdale; but he laughed with such manifest delight in her behavior, good or bad, that she really did feel a little ashamed of herself as she inquired for Mr. Archer, and went upstairs.

Dick was engaged. She had to wait a minute or two. When the person who was with him passed out, she recognized him as Mr. Saunders, the solicitor who was conducting Annie's case. Somehow the incident made

her feel less uncomfortable. After all, Dick was not likely to suffer.

“ I was sorry to make you wait,” said Dick. “ I ’m very busy this morning.”

“ I sha’n’t keep you for long,” said Ella, and then the double meaning of the words struck her, and she laughed nervously.

“ Is anything wrong ? ” said Dick.

“ I don’t know if it ’s something gone wrong or something come right,” said Ella, doubtfully ; “ but I almost think it is something come right for both of us. It ’s mere justice to say you have never professed any very violent affection for me, but still——”

She stopped short, for, to her surprise, Dick had turned very white, and then his face had settled into the expression of emotionless politeness which means that a man expects to hear something that will pain him. Could Dick have really cared for her enough to have necessitated that quick but quite apparent change from dismay to self-control ?

“ Dick,” she said, with the deprecatory look that made her seem quite small and meek, and took all the arrogant arch out of her nose — “ Dick, when two people make a mistake, and one of them finds it out, that one ought to say so at once, don’t you think ? ”

Dick merely waited with polite attention.

She found her task more and more difficult. Why

had Dick looked frightened—yes, actually frightened for a moment? Suppose after all that he cared for her very much indeed!

“Someone always has to speak out,” said Ella, “or life would never get on at all. And you never would, Dick. I’ve told you so before.”

“Yes?”

That little habit of saying “Yes” in interrogation had always irritated her. Why could n’t he say “Well?” like anyone else?

“Mark Scarsdale has come back,” she said.

“Oh! How is he?”

The question seemed absurdly inadequate. It gave her no help whatever. She could only sit looking embarrassed, possibly for the first time in her life.

Dick suddenly leaned back in his chair and burst into laughter.

Ella was very angry.

“I am glad you are amused,” she said.

Dick apologized abjectly. “I’m very sorry,” he said. “I was laughing at my own density. I assure you, that’s all. Please go on.”

“If you had been a girl, I should have said that you were hysterical,” said Ella.

“If I had been a girl, you would have been right. As it is, I am afraid I was shockingly rude,” said Dick. “Now, go on. Mr. Scarsdale is returned, and is quite well—did you say he was quite well? And the mistake

you have discovered is your engagement, which you want broken off at once."

Dick was speaking quite cheerfully and easily. Ella was the more puzzled. Why had he been so strange at first?

"I'm so glad you are not angry," said Ella. "I was really very much ashamed of myself, you know, and very sorry; but if you don't care at all——"

"It would be all the same, would n't it?" said Dick, "whether I cared or not."

Ella turned a very beautiful and very becoming shade of red.

"I see it would. Then we won't discuss that part of the matter. I'll give you back your word, and we'll say no more about it."

"You never say anything about anything!" cried Ella, impatiently. "I don't believe you have any feelings of any sort. I came up here feeling as wicked as a murderer. Well, I really could n't help being happy, but I honestly was ashamed of myself, Dick, and you have surprised me very much. It would have been shocking of you to have married me, caring so little. Dick, why in the world did you ask me to marry you?"

For one moment she thought Dick was going to tell her. Perhaps for one moment he longed for the relief of doing so. He liked her immensely. Her vanity, her ingenuous selfishness, the directness of her methods, all

pleased him. But one cannot say to one woman, "Because you were the one person in all the world who seemed to need me ;" the inference that another woman did not follows too closely on such a confession. So he said nothing. Ella began to be herself again. She had not enjoyed feeling small and ashamed.

"I'm glad you are not angry," she said ; "and still more glad you are not sorrier. I suppose you might scold me if you liked. Still, for a girl to marry a man she only likes and respects and believes in is n't so very discreditable is it? And I really did like you, Dick."

"You are not going to stop liking me, are you?" said Dick. "I sha'n't stop liking you any the more because I don't make myself disagreeable. I believe you would have been a good wife, and I'd have done my best to be a good husband, and we should have been as happy as our neighbors. Now, I suppose you are going to be much happier than your neighbors."

"If I'm not," said Ella, "I shall have, at least, the satisfaction of being miserable with one person who really loves me."

"Well, I congratulate you on that. It's something," said Dick. She had forgotten him and his feelings, which was fortunate. He went on speaking a few common-place congratulations, and she told him of Scarsdale's improved prospects. Presently she rose to go and, removing her glove, began to draw Dick's ring from her finger.

“ Won't you keep that for a wedding present ? ” he said. “ Not there, of course—Scarsdale will want that place for his—but on the other hand. Let me put it on the other hand for you.”

He did so, and then saw Ella down-stairs and into a cab. Then he looked at his watch, and wondered if he had time to catch the solicitor at his office.

Annie's case against her husband was simple enough, but there were still one or two details to arrange. The trial was to come on in a day or two. Annie was taking it very quietly, but Dick knew how much more the thing frightened and distressed her in the prospect than its actual occurrence would. He was with her nearly every day now, and found himself walking instinctively in the direction of her house. She was to continue to live in Sloane Street until this preliminary affair was over, and then stay with Mrs. Bailey until Beatrice's marriage, and after that go abroad with Mrs. Bailey and Effie. Now his engagement was broken off, there was no reason why he should not join them. He found himself walking quickly, going over his interview with Ella, and laughing at it.

He heard a step behind him, and, turning, saw the lawyer. He waited. He had forgotten all about him.

“ I went back to your office,” the lawyer said. “ I had forgotten something I was just about to ask you when Miss Payne called. By the way, I have never congratulated you on your engagement. It shows

what an old fogey I am that I had forgotten I knew so charming a young lady as Miss Payne till I saw her in your office to-day. I used to see a good deal of her when her father was alive. I ought to have remembered the name when you told me of your engagement."

"It 's broken off," said Dick.

"Oh! I 'm sorry." The lawyer looked astonished for a lawyer, but he was himself again in a second. "Well, about this business," he said; and he mentioned the incident which he had forgotten. His way home lay across the park, so he walked on with Dick till he came to the cross path that led to it, and then the two separated carelessly.

Dick walked on, considering. The lawyer was too busy a man to be curious. He had understood, of course, why a man acting, as Dick was, the part of champion to a married woman, had instinctively mentioned his own engagement. It would seem natural to him that after his own visit Mrs. Stravil's friend should go and report to her. Mr. Saunders's own way being across the park rendered it an easy and insignificant thing that he should overtake him. Ella's manner in his office had not suggested jealousy, except to himself for one moment. It did not matter if the lawyer knew that the broken engagement was no calamity. Lawyers had to know things, and when they were good fellows, such as this one, their knowing things mattered very little. Still, he walked slower.

He had reached the drive, and noticed a carriage stop just in front of him. The occupant was smiling and waiting for him to come up. It was Lady Feltringham. He had forgotten that she was to be back in town this week.

"You are in good spirits," she said.

"Was I in such good spirits that you saw it all that way off?" asked Dick.

"Why, yes; it was in your very walk. I wanted to scold you, but I won't. I never scold anyone who looks happy. Happiness is the only thing I respect; there's so little of it that it should be sacred. One must n't interrupt it. Why have you not come to see me?"

"I will come to-morrow, if I may," said Dick.

"No, not to-morrow—the next day; no, some dull people are coming then. The day after—don't forget."

Lady Feltringham drove on.

Dick turned and walked slowly homeward. The lawyer did not matter at all; Lady Feltringham did not matter much; but there was one person who must not find him in good spirits the day his engagement with Ella was broken off.





CHAPTER XXVII

LADY FELTRINGHAM'S CONCERN

THE publicity of the court turned out to be very much less dreadful than Annie's fears of it had been. The whole affair was over so soon. It had only to be stated and proved that Eustace Stravil had left his wife, and had sent word, through his lawyers, that he would not return to her, that she had written to him, and received back her letter unopened, and that she had done nothing to provoke this treatment. There was no defence, and the order for the husband's return within fourteen days was obtained without opposition.

Annie had left the court directly she had given her evidence. Beatrice Bailey was with her. Ella had kept away since the breaking off of her engagement. Dick and the lawyer followed them to Sloane Street almost before they had had time, as Beatrice put it, to take off their hats and begin to be nervous.

Annie took the news very quietly. "I am glad it's done," she said, and sat looking so very tired that both

men knew the very best thing for them to do was to leave at once.

“ Come soon, Dick ; but I can't talk to-day.”

Then she turned to speak to the lawyer, but he had shaken hands and gone before she had found more than an incoherent word or two.

“ I 'll take care of her,” Beatrice said to Dick as she went to the door with him. “ I do wish it had n't been at our house she had met that man ! ”

Dick thought it would have been more to the purpose to wish she had not met him at any house, but did not say so. Beatrice went back to Annie.

“ I wish you could come home with me to-night,” she said.

“ But I can't ; I have to stay in this house a fortnight,” said Annie. “ I must go through all the forms properly ; but just now I think I 'll go to bed. It 's a funny time to go to bed, but I 'm so horribly tired. I don't think there 's anything so tiring in the world as being anxious, and not showing it.”

“ You certainly did n't show it this afternoon,” said Bee. “ You were very calm.”

“ It was n't this afternoon. It was waiting for this afternoon. I suppose I am calm. Perhaps it 's my nature to be calm, or my training. Mother was a very placid person, you know. I remember now how one of my governesses once told me, when I was in a temper, that I must n't let my mother see me so, for

any shock might kill her. She was a nice governess, and took the very best way to cure my temper ; but I expect she did n't bargain for my taking her quite so seriously as I did. She cured me a little too effectually of showing my feelings. One can't ever be quite sure of what they are oneself if one keeps them in too rigidly."

"Your mother might have died at any time, might she not?" asked Beatrice.

"Yes, I suppose she really died of joy at seeing me so happily married."

Beatrice felt the bitterness in the speech, and struggled to get away from it.

"Mr. Archer is a calm person, too," she said, "and I suppose he had as much to do with forming your character, as the phrase is, as any governess."

"Dick? Yes. He's such a calm person that he does more than teach you to curb your feelings: he almost makes you not have any. Bee, do you know all this time I have been wishing I were one of those women who scream and go into hysterics, and lie on the floor and writhe. I should like to do it now, but I can't. The next best thing would be to take an opiate that would keep me asleep for five years. You might wake me up just for one day, for your wedding, and then let me drop off again."

"And wake up when all this fuss was quite forgotten," said Beatrice. "I don't think it will take

five years, you know ; but if it did, you 'd find Mr. Archer had managed all your affairs quite comfortably for you in the interval."

" I 'm sure he would. He and Ella, of course. By the way, where is Ella ? I have n't seen her for ever so long. Why ? Has anything been the matter ? "

" She thought you 'd be vexed with her for throwing Mr. Archer over," said Beatrice.

" For what ? "

" Did n't you know that her engagement with Mr. Archer was broken off ? "

" No; is it ? Why ? "

" Mark Scarsdale came home quite rich. You remember Effie always said she was fond of him. I made sure Mr. Archer would have told you at once."

" No."

" I suppose he was too unhappy, and did n't want to trouble you while you had so much on your mind."

" I wish somebody would write a story about people who are blind and dumb," said Annie. " It would be a very pathetic story, and of course it would end badly."

" But do you think there would be anything interesting to say about people who were blind and dumb ? " said Beatrice. " You see, they could n't possibly have any feelings about things if they could not see or hear them."

Annie rose from her seat laughing a little.

"Good-night, dear. I'll go to bed, as I said. Mr. Sutton is coming to dinner, so you won't be alone ; and since you are going to be married so soon I really need not stay to chaperon you. Besides, there 's Edwards."

"That 's right ; be yourself again and laugh after all your worries," said Beatrice, affectionately.

"I 've got so far," said Annie, "that I 'm thinking of something funny to tell Dick, just as I used to do."

So she crept away to hide in her lair, like any other wounded animal ; but she laughed because she was an animal with emotions and a brain.

The thing she wanted to tell to Dick was that she quite understood why men loved stupid women. It is so restful to be entirely misunderstood.

That same evening Dick, at a big crush in Brook Street, found himself confronted by Lady Feltringham, and it flashed into his mind that he had entirely forgotten to call on her the day she had mentioned. He said he was very sorry, and looked shocked at himself. It was the only thing to be done in the circumstances.

"Let us sit down," said Lady Feltringham, "and you shall make your excuses."

"There are only two credible excuses in life," said Dick. "One is 'I forgot.' That 's good, because one never forgets unpleasant things, and scarcely ever unimportant things. The other is what the scene-shifter said to Irving. Do you know the story ?"

Lady Feltringham composed herself to listen.

"It was in his pre-knightly days," said Dick ; " so it's an old story, but that does n't matter. The scene-shifter had let the curtain down in the middle of Irving's final speech, and everyone looked for bloodshed, at the least, when he called the offender before him and asked sternly :

" ' Why did you let that curtain down ? ' "

" ' Because I was a damned fool, Mr. Irving ! ' said the man. Of course, that ended the incident. There was absolutely no more to be said. ' Hamlet,' that is to say the scene-shifter, had made himself ' of the faction that was wronged ' with one breath. I 'm always a little afraid to tell that story for fear some dull person should say it is not true, and I 've liked it so long I could n't spare it. "

" And which of the two credible excuses is yours just now ? " asked Lady Feltringham.

" When I told you a nice little story like that," said Dick, reproachfully, " I thought I should divert your attention from the matter in hand. A young lady told me the other day that when she was a child, whenever she had been behaving badly, she used to fall downstairs, and that always diverted attention from her conduct. Don't you think it was rather clever of her ? "

" Very clever, indeed ; but her mother must have been rather foolish, don't you think ? When are you to be married ? Have you arranged yet ? "

"Miss Payne has arranged that we are not to be married at all."

Lady Feltringham said "My dear Dick!" and looked quite troubled.

At that moment someone claimed her attention, and it was some moments before she could turn to Dick again. When she did, she still looked troubled. "Let us go back to that nice sofa again. I want to say something tiresome," she said.

"What is it?" he asked, seating himself beside her.

"I like some of my friends for being good, and some for being wicked," she said.

"Either reason is good enough," said Dick. "In fact, any reason is good enough for liking anybody."

"For instance, there's Jim. I like him for being wicked. If he were to reform, and take life seriously and marry well, or do anything to make himself a credit to us, I should quite miss him. It would make him into somebody else."

"Jim" was the young man Dick had gone to warn that Sunday morning when he had met Annie coming from church. He laughed.

"I don't think you need fear Jim disappointing you in that way," he said.

"Now you, on the contrary, I like for being good," Lady Feltringham continued, "and I should miss you much more than I should him if you were to turn into somebody else. My dear boy, it would grieve me."

Dick looked up to speak, and then changed his mind and waited.

"I heard something that troubled me the other day from Mary Calne. You know her, don't you? Wendover's elder sister, who married that tiresome man with the money. You know what she was saying, of course?"

"Does one ever know what people are saying?" said Dick, a little impatiently.

"That's an admission, is n't it, that you guess it was something about you; and your engagement being broken off makes it worse, of course."

"My engagement is broken off because Miss Payne is going to marry someone else."

"Oh, is that it?" Lady Feltringham looked relieved for a moment, and then grave again. "But you might have looked a little sorrier, might n't you? It would have been wiser."

"I suppose I might have done that if I had thought of it."

"It would have been wiser," repeated Lady Feltringham. "Mary Calne says she is a nice little thing, who ought to have nicer friends than she has."

"I have known Mrs. Stravil for a good many years," said Dick, not in answer to Lady Feltringham's speech, but to the fact that she was speaking on the subject at all.

"Yes, I know," said Lady Feltringham; "but then the world at large is unfortunately too coarse to believe

in friendship, or feel the need of it. I 'm afraid I 've been something of a mischief-maker myself. I made some remark about your being in such good spirits that afternoon, and then that stupid creature, Mary, who really is quite at home among her husband's friends, told me a good deal about the poor little girl. What I can't understand is why she was allowed to make such a marriage at all."

"Unfortunately, it was no one's business except her mother's to prevent her," said Dick, "and her mother was an invalid, quite conscious that she might leave her daughter unprovided for at any moment. From her point of view, his desertion of his church was a point in his favor."

"Yes, I suppose there are people who take that view ; and the girl would naturally be brought up in the same opinions. Still, they might both have known that the habit of desertion is a bad habit, might n't they ? I suppose you could n't have done anything ?"

"I did not know that the man was an ordained priest until too late."

"Too late ?"

"Till she was fond of him. In fact, I knew nothing of the affair at all till it was practically settled."

"It would have been a great deal better for the girl to have had a little unhappiness then than to have had to go through all she has gone through," said Lady Feltringham.

"If anyone had known what was coming," said Dick.

"Well, yes, of course ; no one did. If the gift of prophecy had n't died out the world would be much more comfortable, would n't it ? I'm sorry for her, of course ; but I'm afraid you are not being very wise, Dick."

"I don't know," said Dick. "I am trying to be some sort of use to a woman who is good and unhappy. If people gossip about it, it can't be helped."

"If you had only looked a little sorrier these last few days," repeated Lady Feltringham. "I wish I had n't been at home when poor Mary called. I'll never commit myself to an opinion about anyone's looks again. But I was a little anxious about you, Dick. You have n't said, by the way, that there's no occasion for anxiety."

"There's no occasion."

Instantly Lady Feltringham's face cleared. She even laughed a little.

"Of course, you'd have said just the same if there had been," she said.

"You would n't have believed me in that case. That would have been the difference."

"What I really want to know," she said, "is whether I can't be of any use to your friend. 'Good and unhappy' amounts to a sort of claim on one, does n't it?"

"It's not often one meets with people who think so," said Dick, "but when one does one loves them."

“ Well, what can I do ? ” said Lady Feltringham. “ I should have called on her, as a matter of course, if— ” Lady Feltringham stopped short. She had been going to say “ if, as I always expected, you had married her yourself, ” but remembered Dick’s relief at his broken engagement, and changed her sentence to “ if I had not gone abroad. ”

“ We ’ve all read our Thackeray, ” said Dick. “ The sort of people who would misunderstand Mrs. Stravil are exactly the sort of people who would be answered by a call from you. ”

“ After all you have told me, I should like very much to know your friend, ” said Lady Feltringham. “ So, if these very draughty rooms don’t give me an attack of bronchitis, I will call on Mrs. Stravil within the week, and then I can ask her here for the thirty-first. ”





CHAPTER XXVIII

UNCERTAINTY

THE fourteen days were past. Annie had spent them quietly enough in preparing for her visit abroad, and making arrangements to be ready to give up the house and her allowance into her husband's lawyer's hands directly the prescribed time should have expired.

Of course, her friends had remonstrated against her giving up her income. Most of the remonstrances she merely heard silently and disregarded. To Archer she was a little more explicit.

"While the boy's a baby, we can live very well on what mother left," she said; "later, of course, I shall ask Eustace to pay his school bills, because that's what I ought to do. But if one had only feelings to consider, it would be very much less humiliation to ask you for money than to ask Eustace. Don't talk any more now. Come and see me on the thirteenth, and stay all the evening." The thirteenth was the last of the fourteen days.

Dick came late in the afternoon. It was the only evening she had been alone during the past fortnight, but a long-standing engagement with her *fiancé* had claimed Beatrice. Dick was a little surprised not to find her with her hostess.

"I thought she was going to stay with you till you went to her mother," he said.

"She would have stayed if I'd asked her. She's very kind," said Annie. "But George Sutton has his rights, you know. Besides, she thinks I take things very easily. People always do when one says nothing."

"That's so nice of them," said Dick. "By the way, is n't that why one says nothing?"

"Dick, was that why you did n't tell me about Ella?"

"No," said Dick. He paused a moment, and then added: "It was unimportant."

She looked at him anxiously for a moment, and then began to walk up and down the room. "I'm glad it was unimportant," she said.

"How did you know anything about it?"

"The usual way—the Baileys."

"I was n't going to tell you till your own worries were settled; and when they were settled it did n't seem to matter."

"I wonder"—Annie's tone was visibly restrained from being that of a question—"I wonder why you ever asked her if—if it mattered so little, you know."

"Ella said a very true thing about me once," said

Dick. "She said I did n't live ; I just stood about and let things happen. This happened, and now it has unhappened, so to speak. I suppose that 's not the sort of thing one ought to say."

"And to think of its being unimportant with her too," said Annie, stopping in her walk.

"Oh, it was even less important to her," said Dick, promptly.

"I know. They told me about Mr. Scarsdale. Effie guessed it all the while. I did n't. Some of the things I admired her for doing were n't so generous as I thought."

"No ; some of the seeming generosity was indifference. I knew, but I did n't tell you, because you always found such pleasure in overrating people."

"I don't think I overrate you, Dick."

"I should like to know, just this once, what you do think of me," said Dick, slowly.

"I think you are the one man a woman dare have for a friend."

Dick smiled, and rose, holding out his hand.

"You are not going ?" she said. "Please don't ! I expected you to stay this evening. Don't you remember. You said you would. Why, you must have remembered, because you are dressed."

"So I am," said Dick, placidly. "I was n't sure that you remembered. I was giving you a chance of forgetting comfortably if you had forgotten."

"Of course I had not," said Annie. "I should have been a little frightened if I had been alone to-night."

"There 's nothing to be frightened about."

"As if that mattered! One 's frightened because one *is*—not because there is a reason why they should be. When this evening is over, I shall have done a very important thing. You said it was settled; but you know it is n't really formally settled till after to-night, and I 'm glad you will be with me when it is quite done."

"I shall be able to be with you whenever you need me," Dick said.

"Oh!"—her face flushed as she turned to him; trust and gratitude made it very beautiful—"I think I 'm the happiest woman in all the world to have a friend like you. I 'd wasted my life, and then, instead of being desolate, I have you. I wish I could be as much to you—as much help and comfort, I mean—as you will always be to me; but I can't, because you don't need me. You have all the doing, and I have only to say thank you."

"I find it quite a good arrangement," said Dick.

She faced him, speaking the words in a low tone, but with a tone of defiance:

"I 'm glad it was unimportant about Ella."

"Thanks."

"Don't; don't think I mean only for your sake: it 's

for my own. I should have been glad you were not married even if things had been different. You remember, I owned that, and how ashamed I was of it at first ! I 'm glad, and ashamed of being glad now, but it 's the only thing I 'm ashamed of."

A shadow rose in her face as she looked back for one moment, and then passed from it with a completeness that told it had passed forever.

" I 'm not sorry I was married," she continued, " because of the boy. But things have been very horrible. After to-night all the horrible part will be done with. The world will be like it was when we used to walk about in Kensington Gardens together, and I did n't know about horrid things. We shall have to remember a little that other people do know about them, and think about them a great deal, and be very careful ; but that won't be hard, because we never were careless."

" No, that will be simple enough."

" Dick, tell me one thing, and then my mind will be quite at rest, and I won't ask any more questions. I know, of course, I was not the sort of girl you could ever have loved. If Ella was n't the girl, who is ? Who is it that some day will take you away from me ? "

" No one."

" Then if I had n't—if things had been different ? "

" I suppose," said Dick, speaking quite quietly and easily—" I suppose that in the natural course of things

we should have loved each other ; but since things happened as they did, we have got friendship left, and friendship is pretty good in its way."

" Friendship is very good," she said ; " but I shall always be frightened of that unknown girl."

" I will give you a distinct pledge if you like. I 'll stand up in the middle of the hearth-rug and take heaven to witness—though I 'm doubtful of the good taste of subpoenaing heaven in our little earthly affairs—that I will not fall in love, or marry, or do anything absurd. I will find friendship enough as long as you ask friendship from me."

" People say men can't do that," she said. " I don't believe it. There are so many kinds of men. I shall find you the one who can. Now, we won't be serious any more. They ought to have announced dinner before this."

" Tell me about the boy," said Dick.

" There is n't anything to tell. He is so healthy and so good one can't say much about him except, ' Happy is the baby that has no history.' Shall you go to Bee's wedding on Thursday ? "

" I would n't miss it for the world. I 'm so curious to see if Sutton wears a white shirt ! "

" Oh, he will," said Annie. " It 's a secret so far ; but I 've gathered enough from Beatrice to know that after the wedding there will be no more cashmere and gray flannel."

"Will it be a vegetarian breakfast?"

"If it is," said Annie, "we will eat nothing but cake. That would be vegetarian in any case."

"I did n't think of that. Vegetarians make vegetables so much less palatable than anyone else. One could dine quite tolerably on vegetables if only a vegetarian had n't cooked them."

Dinner was announced, and they went down-stairs.

"It is thick soup," said Annie. "That is because you were coming. I used always to have it clear till I learned better. Men always like to begin with thick soup and end with an apple, and either 's a meal in itself, one would say."

"Because they want to eat as much food as they can with the least display," said Dick. "Women never quite understand how much a man would like to eat. They don't appreciate the three dozen oysters story. You remember, the guest mistook them for the supper, but they were merely intended to give him an appetite."

"We have oysters to-night, but they don't come at first to give us an appetite. They are only sauce later on. I had a battle with the cook about them. She did n't want me to have oysters unless we had cod, and I insisted. She thinks me very unconventional. She's the only person who does. Is n't it humiliating? I've only just enough originality to irritate the cook."

"There 's the post," said Dick.

Annie had heard it too, and she started. She turned

rather white, and wondered if a letter from Eustace could count.

“Be a little more unconventional,” said Dick, “and read your letters at once.”

She sent for them. There were two or three.

“Mrs. Bailey—she can wait. Ella—that ’s to tell me what I know already—that can wait, too. This is an invitation—Lady Feltringham—dinner on the thirty-first, with an At Home afterwards, and a note.” She read the note. “She would have called, but an attack of bronchitis kept her to her room. Hopes anyone so old as she is may be forgiven the misfortune that has prevented her making my acquaintance formally before sending the invitation—quite a pretty note. Dick, you have been talking to her about me.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” said Dick. “She ’s a sweet old lady, and I thought——”

“I know just what you thought. I suppose the real reason why she did n’t call was that you only spoke to her this afternoon.”

“No, she really has bronchitis. It ’s just like her to take it for granted that she will be well at a fixed date, if necessary. It was she spoke to me, by the way, not I to her. That was over a week ago.”

“Well, you answered her, I suppose?”

“Yes. You had seemed to be counting on Ella’s—chaperonage, shall we call it? I knew that was gone. Lady Feltringham offered an equivalent.”

"I wonder what you said to make her offer it!"

"It was n't necessary to say anything. It was a very natural thing for her to do. Why should n't she ask you to dinner, as well as anybody else?"

"Just so! Why not?" said Annie. "Only she has chosen just the very moment when it will be very pleasant indeed for me to know her. So I can't help being glad. Everything is being so nice! Do you think it would be any good my setting to work to learn the sort of things boys have to learn so as to be able to help mine, when the time comes?"

"I think it would be a pleasure to you, and that's always a good thing. But there's time enough."

"But the sooner one begins the better. A splendid old lady told me the other day that she always used to sing her babies to sleep with the Latin declensions, so that when the time came for them to learn them at school, instead of getting into trouble three times a week, they knew them all by instinct."

"We'll have Latin lessons once a week," said Dick. "I think I can undertake to teach you enough to sing the child asleep with."

"You say 'the child' of him just as you used to say it of me," said Annie.

"We're going to be just as fond of him," said Dick.

"He is a nice little fellow already, you know," said Annie. "It's no use my trying to be unprejudiced any longer. You see, I've seen other babies. Some

began to show that they were little wretches before they were a fortnight old, and others were nice just as soon. So it is n't prejudice, it 's experience, makes me think mine a dear little fellow."

"What are the traits?" asked Dick, with interest.

"Well, a nasty baby goes on crying when you 've given it what it wants. That sort of baby grows into the person who goes on girding at you after you 've apologized, and reminds you of grievances long after you 've thought you 'd made up for them. My baby howls hard enough for what he wants, but directly he gets it he stops crying. That means he 'll always be friends directly one says one 's sorry."

"Do you mean to say," said Dick, "that you intend to bring up that poor child to forgive people the moment they take the trouble to say they are sorry? It 's a most unprincipled thing to do. I 'm the child's godfather, and I sha'n't allow it. Life grows unendurable to a man who does n't know how to bear malice properly."

"I think it 's terrible enough to go on being angry as long as one must," said Annie. "We have a right to forgive people when they say they are sorry."

"If they are really sorry, and their sorrow is in proper proportion to the offence, and if they find it extremely difficult and unpleasant to own to being sorry at all; otherwise, you just encourage them to offend again. It 's like letting people off with a fine they

don't miss, and any magistrate will tell you how immoral that is."

"Oh, but one always is sorry for having made a baby cry," said Annie.

"That 's a mean evasion," cried Dick. "We were discussing a great principle, and you were in the wrong."

They both laughed, and Edwards entered to remove the fish.

"This is where the oysters come," said Annie: "stewed fowl and oyster sauce. It ought to be nice."

"It will be," said Dick. "We'll let the immorality of careless forgiveness go undiscussed."

At the moment, through the open dining-room door they heard the sharp, unmistakable click of a latch-key. Annie had begun some careless answer to Archer's speech. It died on her lips. She raised a white, startled face, listening. Dick, listening also, was as white as she. Even the servant turned pale as he stood still behind the chair. There was a moment's intense silence, through it the faint sounds of someone moving at the hat-rack.

It was Edwards spoke first.

"Shall I see if that is my master, ma'am?"

Annie said, "Yes." Dick looked at her, almost frightened. The happy woman who had been chattering seemed turning into stone before his eyes.

The servant left the room, but there was no need of

any question. The two friends knew what had happened quite well. It seemed a long time to both before Eustace stood in the doorway. He looked older, thinner, seriously ill indeed, but intensely handsome and quite calm. He was in evening dress.

“ Good-evening, my dear ; good-evening, Archer.”

“ Bring back the soup, Edwards.”

Again, the unnatural tone in which the commonplace words were spoken frightened Archer.

Stravil answered lightly :

“ No, no ; I ’m late, and must take my chance. I ’ll just go on where you are. I meant to be here in time to take you out somewhere ; but it ’s just as pleasant to find Archer here. How far have you got ? The *entrée*. That will do. Is there any of the Sauterne left that I bought at Sowerby’s sale, Edwards ? Yes ? Then bring some. You are looking very well, Annie. I understand you have been taking care of her in my absence, Archer. I am obliged to you. No—don’t move—this will do.”

“ It ’s been a pleasure to me to be of any use,” said Archer.

Stravil had seated himself carelessly at the side of the little table, and waited while Edwards served him.

“ I had a horrible crossing,” he said, “ and a detestable journey.”

“ Did you come by Ostend ? ” asked Dick.

“ No. I came from Calais. I wanted to try the

other route. I am thinking of taking my wife to Paris at the end of the season, or sooner if she has no engagements she particularly cares about. Have you, my dear?"

"Mrs. Stravil has been very quiet," said Archer.

"I stayed long enough in Paris to bring you some diamonds, my dear," Stravil went on. "We will see how you like them after dinner."

Archer saw Annie try to make her lips move, and then give up the attempt.

"Why did you get diamonds in Paris, when you were coming to London?" he said.

"Oh, I liked the glitter and sparkle. I grant you there's more dignity about English setting, but Annie does n't want dignity. She wants—well—not daring—she has plenty of that—but more show of it. Besides, I had to stay in Paris for some clothes. My tailor has a branch place there."

Annie was making no effort to speak now. It seemed impossible that her husband should not notice her silence, and protest against Archer's answering for her; but he went on talking unconcernedly of Paris and his journey. Archer wished Annie would faint. He hoped for that every moment. And yet he knew she was suffering too much for such relief to be possible to her. When at last dinner was over, and he saw her make an effort to rise, he knew that she had been collecting her strength for that moment, and would be able

to leave them quietly. He was almost angry at the calm that seemed to make the situation hopeless.

“No, no,” cried Eustace, as she rose, putting out a hand to detain her. “Don’t go! I don’t want to be left with him. It’s you I’ve come home to, not him. He’ll excuse us in the circumstances.”

Still Annie did not speak. She did not even draw away as her husband’s touch neared her. She did not even look at Dick for help. She had no strength left for anything but endurance. There was a pause.

“I’m a sort of guardian to Mrs. Stravil,” said Archer. “You remember, her mother wished it, and you said something about it yourself once. You were joking, of course; but it might be as well, don’t you think, if you were to let her go, and we were to talk matters over.”

“I refuse it. I know the part you played, and I say nothing.”

All the fury of feeling behind Stravil’s self-command showed for a moment—only a moment. Then he added courteously—“Except that I’m obliged to you, and I said that before. You have been of service to my wife in a matter where most men’s service would have caused scandal, and I have heard of no scandal. I am blaming no one for the part my wife played. On the contrary, I justify it by my return; but, having complied with the law, I am her husband, and, in that character, I ask you to excuse us.”

They were all three standing now, almost in the group their position at the table had made. Stravil and Archer faced each other. Annie was between them, a little in the background. Stravil's manner had not been insolent. He spoke again, still with forced courtesy.

"That 's all about it, Archer. You 've behaved well, and I 've behaved badly ; but you 're not my guardian, so I won't be lectured. The only person who has a right to lecture me is my wife, and my wife, as you see, says nothing."

Again the storm of feeling showed through the careless words. This time it was passionate tenderness. His very fingers trembled. He stretched a hand towards his wife, not quite reaching her.

"She was always a quiet little thing," he said.

Annie made a step forward. The rustle of her skirt turned Archer's eyes towards her from the husband, who, standing firmly upon his rights, showed an air of civil but emphatic dismissal, to the wife whose white face said absolutely nothing. She might, perhaps, be appealing to his friendship. "I think you the one man a woman dare have for a friend"—the words repeated themselves to him again and again, twenty times in a second. She had overrated him with the rest, and he had not warned her.

"Friendship has nothing to do here," said Stravil.

The words might have been an answer to the

thoughts of the wife and the friend. They were meant to be cruel. The man took triumphant pleasure in the fact that they were cruel. They were meant to strike the friend, not the wife, but he heard Annie catch her breath ; her figure seemed to stiffen and strengthen. He knew now how horribly afraid she had been all this time ; but he knew that now she was less afraid. The color was creeping back into her face. She held out her hand, and smiled a little.

“ Good-night, Dick. I shall see you to-morrow ? ”

“ At what hour ? ”

“ Oh, come as early as you like. Come to breakfast about eleven,” said Stravil, in a tone of ordinary hospitality.

“ Good-night, then,” said Archer.

Stravil followed him to the door, and repeated a civil “ Good-night ” as it closed ; then stood considering a moment. Presently he felt in the pockets of the coat he had left on the rack for two big jeweller’s cases, and went back to the dining-room. It was empty. He tried the drawing-room ; that was empty also ; so was Annie’s boudoir. He crossed to the bedroom, and tried the door of it. It was not locked. He entered.





CHAPTER XXIX

REPENTANCE

ANNIE was standing by the mantelpiece. She was very white and very calm. Eustace had opened the jewel cases on his way up-stairs, but now he flung them aside, as things too trivial for notice at such a moment. The careless self-possession he had maintained till now was gone. There was not a trace of it.

“You are angry,” he cried. “Jealous—but you need not be. Don’t you know what it means that I have come back? The fight is over, and you have won.”

She did not speak. She stood quietly in her place waiting. He crossed the room with arms outstretched, but he stopped short.

“What is it?” he said. “You are going to reproach me! We have n’t got to the reconciliation stage?” He broke into a laugh. “My dear, you have nothing to complain of, if you only knew. I suppose some busy-body has been telling you that it was not always monasteries I left you for before; but you must not

blame me for that. When you first woke the old faith in me, I could n't bear my love for you. I did n't love those others ; I thought they might help me to break your hold over me ; but that was no use. Then I got desperate, and thought that if I were lost I would have the full price of my soul, and make the most of this life at least ; but that was no use either ; I hated them. It was you, you only who counted in the struggle. I did struggle. I fought for my soul, but the fight 's over. I thought that if I did not give way to temptation when I came to you that night I should be safe. When I had strength to send back your letters unopened I thought I was safe. I loved the struggle. It was my one joy to sit with the latch-key in my hand thinking how I could come back if I would, but that I would not. I thought of that always, while I prayed — while they prayed for me. God, with all His priests, fought against you ; but you have won. I shall never leave you again, never be harsh with you again. I have come back to love ; and if hell 's the price I must pay, we 'll pay it together."

Again he would have taken her in his arms—again he stopped short, though she neither moved nor looked at him.

" Did you know," she said, " that we have a child ? "

" A child ? A son ? Where is he ? "

She moved to the child's bed. He followed and

stood opposite her. One feeling seemed to chase another so fast across his face that she could not read them, but the last was of intense satisfaction and relief.

"We will make him a priest," he said. "He shall atone for us. We will give him to the Church in exchange for our souls."

"No!"

"You are angry," he said. "You won't forgive me. You never were so cold before. I must win you over again. You shall remember the days when you first loved me—the first days of our honeymoon."

"It's because I remember that, it is no use your coming back, Eustace," she said. "I don't love you—and I loathe your love for me."

The quiet intensity of the words broke through the excitement that possessed him. He drew back, incredulous.

"You are angry," he said; "you say that to punish me. No wife ever loved her husband more."

"No," she cried, "I think no wife ever did, Eustace; but you made me ashamed of my love, and I could n't go on loving after that."

"But you were angry when I left," he cried—"cut to the heart. The priest told me so. You must be glad when I come back."

"Yes, I was angry, but I could forgive your leaving me. I could forgive even that—that you told me just now, about other women. I never heard a word of

it till now. But I can never forgive the horrible thoughts that made you go, nor will I share the horrible love you offer me now."

" You appealed to the law to call me back."

" Yes. I faced the public degradation. The shame of it—oh, it was dreadful. Horrible people were laughing, and saying horrible things of me for what I did ; but I did it for your sake, and mine, and my son's. Because I was afraid that you would come back to a love you thought wicked. If you had not, we should have been free. You, from what seems a deadly sin to you, and I, from the shame of suffering such love ; and my son—it was for his sake most of all. He shall never think as you do—never. You do not know what love is."

" Not to know ? When I have come back to it at the cost of my soul ! " he cried.

" When you think it will cost your soul, you do not know. If you had come back because you had learned what love really is, I could have borne it. I'd have tried to forget what you made me suffer and love you as I used ; but such love as yours hurts more than contempt. It made the world hateful to me. You made me ashamed of what I had thanked God for night and morning. You want to make my son a priest to bribe God to forgive what I thanked Him for. See here——"

She drew back the coverings, and unfastened the

child's robe, uncovering his breast and showing a deep purple mark across it.

"What 's that?" cried Eustace. "How in the world did that happen?"

"You remember that night—that last night—when I came to you? You had something in your hand when you struck me?"

"The crucifix—oh——"

He drew back with a cry, then threw up his arms with a gesture that seemed a last, despairing protest.

"My God! Let it be remembered she came to me, warm, loving, tempting me—and I resisted—I did not yield. If I fail now, I made a good fight. Let that be remembered when the time comes to judge me."

He threw himself towards her and the child. It was she who thrust him back now.

"Stand back! Don't touch the child! You are ashamed of the love that brought him. I say that mark shall be the only trace you give him of the horrible things you believe. You think God made a world that can only exist by means of what He hates—or at best tolerates. I think God gave love to the world because He loved the world. The very things that made me believe in Him—the spark in the flint, the life in the reed—are shameful to you—not beautiful, but shameful. When I came to you that night, my thoughts were as pure as the child's thoughts now. I came to tell you God was giving him to us, and beg you to stop

being hard and bitter, and thank God with me and be very happy and grateful. You know what you thought—you said it now—that I had come to tempt you—you struck me on the breast and called me——”

“ Oh, my wife, my wife—my child’s mother—forgive me—forgive me ! ” he cried.

“ You call me wife and mother to-night,” she said, “ and you mean just the same thing.”

He stood back. At last he was beginning to understand. She went on. She was not calm now, but spoke with a power that seemed like inspiration to him. He trembled while he listened.

“ Can you and I love each other ? When we speak of love, we speak different languages. I mean God’s best gift—the soul of the whole world, the one thing quite holy and clean—the thing that makes a man or woman brave and pure and noble—something so much greater, little as there is of it, than all the greed and cruelty and treachery of life that God can still be patient with the world because of it, and good men and women be glad of life for its sake. All the earth, men and beasts, and everything that grows, thank God for love. The eyes of the lowest beasts grow wonderful with tenderness—till we fancy they have souls too—when they bear their young. And you—priest that you are—think shame of it ! You blaspheme God when you speak of it. My son shall not be a priest, nor will I be a priest’s wife. Not

because of the vow you took. I thought you had come to know that vow was wrong and needless, and believed yourself free again, as all men are, to take the happiness God has never once forbidden them to take ; but because I will not give my good love for your evil love—my glory in exchange for your shame ; and my son—my son—” her voice faltered. “ Yes, it is true ; I had rather he died now than lived to think as you do ! ”

Excited, exalted as she was, Annie scarcely noticed how her words struck home. The man who for years had struggled against love as an ignoble temptation, had never seen it, even for one momentarily keen mental glance, as something too noble and sacred for him to reach or touch. He saw it so now. He had believed when they said to him, “ This love is a snare that will lead to your destruction ”—and had counted destruction as nothing weighed against love—had been ready to seek love in hell ; and love was not there after all, but in heaven, where he could not go. The light in the face of the wife that had been, and the mother of a child, rebuked him more than the spoken words. He turned away as if dazzled, moving towards the child's bed.

“ Let me touch him, Annie.”

She drew back.

Eustace touched the child's hand, bending over him. Annie saw his hands tremble.

“ You can come back. After what I have done you

can make me live with you, but you cannot make me love you. For what I call love is nothing to you, and what you call love I hate.”

Stravil laid one hand on the child's head, with the other he drew the covering over the black mark on his breast. He started in his sleep with a little murmur. Annie cried out too, and started forward. Her husband looked up. He saw her face, and a spasm of pain distorted his own. He crouched down beside the child's bed, covering his face. She thought he was sobbing, and bent towards him across the little bed. For the first time since his return she reached out her hand towards him. It cost her an effort, but she laid it lightly on his shoulder.

“ I 'm sorry,” she said.

“ You were always kind,” he said. “ Always a kind woman, always the first to be friends, always ready to forgive. You have been bitter to-night, but—no—don't speak again—you have conquered.”

She did not speak. After a moment her husband rose.

“ Come, my dear, you are white and tired ; sit down here where I can see you better, and we will talk a little. You have said a good deal that is true, and left out a good deal that is true. That is what I must say to you now. Sit down here.”

She sat in the chair he placed, but he did not look at her. He walked up and down the room slowly. Once

he stumbled over the case of diamonds he had flung down, and pushed it away with his foot impatiently. Once he stopped for what seemed a long time by the child's bed. At last he came towards her.

"When a man has made a vow to God, he must not break it. To do that is sin, you will allow. You are not angry if I am ashamed of that?"

"God never asked any man to make that vow."

"The more reason one would say to keep it if it is made voluntarily ; but let that go. I surrendered God's gift of love, but not the devil's gift of brute lust—one can't get rid of that so easily. It lives the stronger for the loss of the other. Love is the one thing strong enough to kill lust. I've learned that to-night. No wonder we priests think so ill of love since we give it up, and have only the unconquerable brute instinct to judge by."

He dropped half on his knees by her chair, resting his head on the arm of it.

"My dear, my dear, I'll leave you. I'll go back to the only life possible to me now. I've learnt what love is to-night, but it is not for me now. It's something beyond my reach, but I've seen it. I know what it is, and that's something. I gave up my vows because, left alone with the brute, the brute conquered. I had lost the power to love as you love long ago ; for if good love can conquer all evil, evil can kill love. The two are foes to the death. One has to choose be-

tween them, and there's no escaping the consequences of the choice. I will go back and repent the sin that broke the vow, and the folly that made it. What shall you do now, my dear?"

"I shall live for the child."

"And for the man who loves you?"

He raised his face. There was no reproach nor jealousy in it. She found herself reminded of the priest's visit and the spiritual exaltation of his face. It seemed almost as if she and her husband could understand each other now.

"Mr. Archer is my best friend," she said.

Her husband smiled.

"I know it. Do you remember once when I had been disgusting you, because your purity rebuked me so unbearably, how you went for a holiday with the man who could love as you love, and came back to me with a child's heart and a child's eyes? That was the day I ceased to be jealous of him. If I had been wiser, I should have begun to be afraid then."

"He had never spoken one word of love to me."

"And never would till the day he died. Does n't all we've been saying point to him as well as to me? Don't you remember what you said once when I, jesting in my coarse way, said he was in love with you: 'You have no idea how different he is from you?' You thought then that meant he did not love you. Now we both know it was the proof that he did. I

knew it when he left you to-night. You heard what I said : ' A friend could do nothing.' I said it deliberately to stab him ; but it was not true. A friend could have done many things. It was the man who loved you who was helpless."

Eustace had risen and faced her. She looked straight into his eyes.

" I knew it too," she said. " That was why I ceased to feel afraid. But you can trust me, Eustace. You heard me say I should live for the child."

He smiled with the same austere tenderness that had shone in the priest's eyes. Every moment seemed to take him farther away from her.

" My good little girl, that 's not enough. You must be as happy as you are good. So far as I may, I must undo the mischief that I have done. If I go away the law will free you. Your beliefs allow divorce, and mine do not admit we are married. If you don't like that way to freedom, you may not have long to wait, or you may have many years ; but I beg of you, with all my soul, to let me have the ease of knowing that the trouble I have made is dead before me. Do as he says, when he comes to-morrow."

" He, he—" she broke through her tears, " he never would ask——"

" Not a thing that could lower your purity or hurt your pride," Stravil interrupted quietly. " I know it, and he is yours with his whole heart now, or ten years

hence, or the day you both die. Still, consider his happiness a little, my dear. He deserves it. I am going to say good-by to you now."

She held out her hands with a little cry.

"Eustace, I 'm sorry!"

"I see you are ; you are crying. You would tell me to stay if you could, but you cannot, and I could not stay now, though you wished it. One can see a life's mistake in a moment, when the light of God in a woman's face shows it ; but one can't change the nature that has grown up in a lifetime. You have made me see what love is ; but, seeing, I know that it is not for me. Let those love who can love, and thank God for it. For me, I must be the priest I vowed to be, so good-by. I don't think I 've done you very much harm, after all. You have a wonderful knack of forgetting evil. Good-night, my dear. Sleep quietly and wake happy."



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